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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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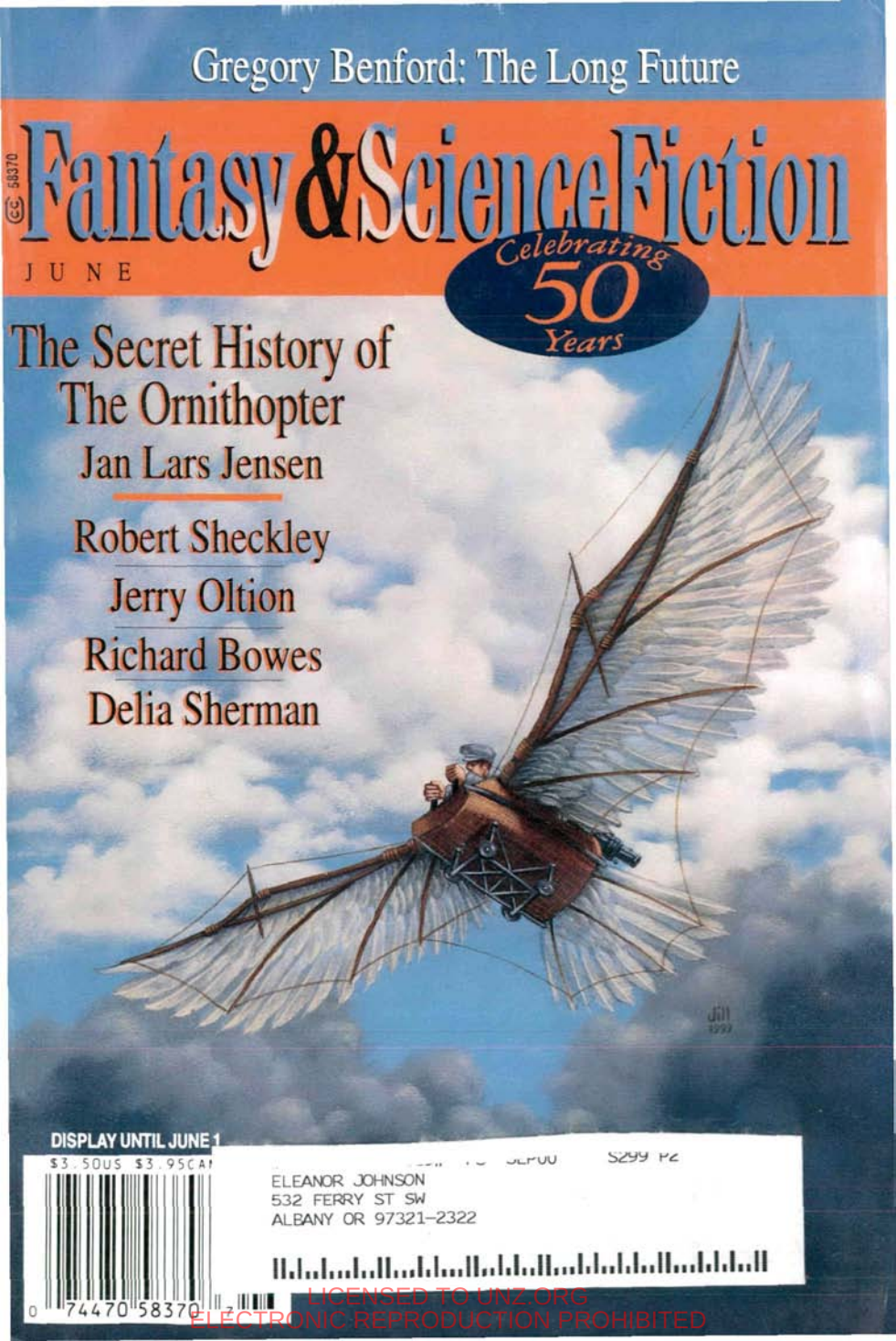

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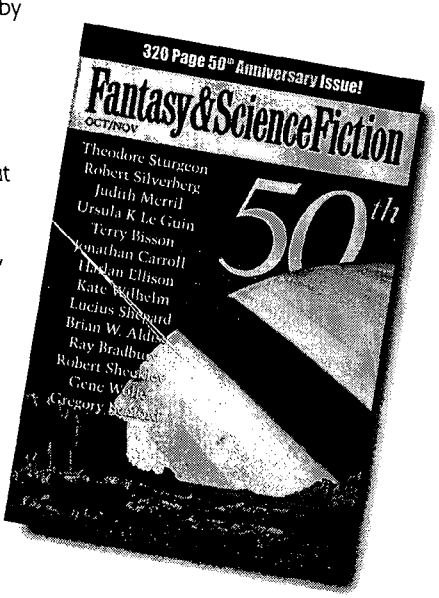

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 1806, MADISON SQUARE STATION, NEW YORK, NY 10159
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Robert Sheckley published his first book in 1954 and his most recent novel, Godshome, *came out a couple of months ago. He has long been one of science fiction's most inventive writers and a master of satire. He says this unpredictable delight came to him in a dream.*

Deep Blue Sleep

By Robert Sheckley

THERE WAS A SUDDEN SNAPPY rapping sound at Gerson's door, followed by a sort of inflamed and frenzied tintinnabulation of the doorbell that would not be denied. It was just plain bad timing, because Gerston had been on the verge of plunging into SnuggleDown, the Deep Blue Sleep program provided by the good people at Unconscious Adventures Unlimited for those who wanted some fun during the hours normally reserved for zilch.

Excitement, thrills, love, laughter, all these could be yours while you slept! Things had changed a lot since the bad old days when at some time in every twenty-four hours you had to lie down in a darkened room and let your mind go into a holding pattern for eight or so hours.

Until recently, mankind was enslaved to sleep, that ancient enemy of our days and nights that condemned us to spend a third of our lives just hanging around doing nothing, and without anything to show for it but vague and generally unsatisfactory dreams that needed highly paid experts to render them even slightly intelligible.

Then along came the Deep Blue Sleep programs.

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At last waking entry could be made into the mysterious kingdom of Mind, and this could be accomplished by ordinary people, not just college grads with a Masters or better in Psychedelic Psychology.

In this brave new world you could even earn a living while asleep, as a dreammaster, for example, or, if that position was filled, there was always room for a dreamslave. And this was a considerable boon for those who were unable to earn anything while awake.

The possibilites for inner travel were little short of amazing. Using the automated electronic services available at a price most middle-class citizens could afford, and lower classes aspire to, you could log onto SnuggleDown and plug the old psyche into a Personalized Sleep Corridor that would take you all the way to the Gates (frequently described as tall and made of iron) of Death. This became a considerable tourist attraction, and some daring couples even opted for marriage in the Oblivion Zone. They were advised not to tarry there too long, however, since death was still not completely under the Company's control, and individual safety could not be guaranteed, even though the Company took every precaution.

Gerston had no interest in going to see the Gates of Death. That could wait until he was in a morbid mood. He passed up on the Waterfall of Creative Endeavor, too, figuring his productive period might as well wait until later, since right now he was modeling Procrastination. He didn't even want to see the Eternal Life exhibition, where the Company had created a great composite jellyfish which it kept in a shallow lagoon in southern Florida.

The jellyfish was a composite entity made up of the life-essences of thousands, soon to be millions, of subscribers, who had opted for something comfortable and not too demanding as a way of spending eternity.

And there were other possibilities. For a little extra you could add on the Limbo Walkers service that would take your mind out from time to time and show it a nice time in the country before putting it back into the undying jellyfish.

There were other interesting things to do while asleep. They were listed on the Extra Services menu and cost a little more. Gerston had chosen one of those, opting for a deluxe interior adventure. He was ready to begin, but first he had to take care of whoever was at the door.

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The loud doorbell shried again, and Gerston called out, "Who's there?"

"Thought-o-gram for Mr. Grumpton."

"Gerston?"

"What I said."

"Who's it from?" Gerson asked, because he led a quiet life and hardly ever received thought-o-grams or their near-cousins, intuition-flashes.

"Hey, buddy, you wanna know what color it is too and does it smell nice? Whyncha accept it and see for yourself? You catch my drift or am I vistling spitzie?"

Gerston had never liked the rudeness of what used to be called the lower classes and now weren't referred to at all. If he didn't answer, the fellow would undoubtedly go away. Still, Gerston wanted to know who had sent him a thought-o-gram and so he unchained the door and opened it. Standing in front of him was a small individual wearing a khaki uniform and a cap on which was written Mercury Thought-Transfer Service.

"Do I have to sign for this thought-o-gram?" Gerston asked.

"Naw, just signify assent by an act of mental volition and it will be so noted on the mind-sensitive receipt form which I carry in this small leather pouch."

Gerston signified, and the messenger said, "Here you are," and touched Gerston's forehead with a transistorized forefinger.

Gerston felt the familiar flash of transmission and waited for the message to appear in his mind. But it didn't. Instead he felt a strange interior sort of a movement. It took him half a beat to realize what this was. Something was stirring and moving inside his mind.

Gerston's first thought was a compact squeamish sensation for which there is no precise verbal equivalent. Somebody was in his mind!

"Hi," a woman's voice in his head said.

"What?" Gerston replied.

"I said 'hi.'"

"Yes, but who are you?"

"I'm Myra."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"You invited me here, don't you remember?"

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"I did?" Gerston said. "The details are a little dim. Perhaps if you could just remind me of the circumstances..."

"It was in the letter you wrote me. 'If you're ever in these parts, do drop in.' That sounds like an invitation to me. What was I supposed to do, go to Siberia?"

"I'm afraid I don't remember," Gerston said. "But the thing I don't understand is, why didn't you just come visit me in the normal fashion?"

"Because I thought this would be a fun thing to do."

"I see."

"But you hate it, don't you?"

"Well..."

"So I made a mistake. So sue me. So I'll go kill myself."

"Myra, there's no need to be melodramatic. Of course I'm glad to see you. Well, it's not exactly seeing, but you know what I mean. It's just that I don't usually entertain people in my head."

"Don't you ever get lonely in there all by yourself?"

"Of course I do. But I still don't — "

"I know, you still don't entertain people in your head. Well, don't worry, I don't hang around where I'm not wanted. Where did that delivery boy go? He said he'd come back for me. At least I think that's what he said. It was a little hard making out what he was saying, you know?"

"But you pretended you did?"

"Sure. I don't like to hurt people's feelings, Harold."

"What did you call me?"

"I called you Harold, of course."

"I'm not Harold."

"But of course you are!"

"Hey, I ought to know who I am. I'm Sid, that's who I am."

"Sid what?"

"Sid Gerston, of course."

"You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Not Harold Greeston?"

"No!"

"Then that idiot delivered me to the wrong mind!"

There was a short pause while Gerston tried to think.

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"As long as you're here," Gerston said at last, "I guess you might as well make yourself comfortable."

"Thanks." There was movement in Gerston's mind, and then a sort of plop, as of someone sitting down. "Nice place you got here."

"Well, it's just my mind, of course, but I try to keep it nice. Some might consider it a little austere."

"A little what?"

"Stiff."

"No, I think it's real nice. You sure got a lot of books in here!"

"Well, I think having a library in one's mind is important."

"How come these titles blur out when I try to read them?"

"It's just the ones I haven't read that blur out that way."

"And what's this here? A kitchen?"

"A virtual kitchen, actually. I thought it would be rather fun, if you know what I mean."

"But what do you do with it?"

"Well, you can eat by merely reading the recipe you want. They're all right here in this book."

"Wow, that's a big book!"

"It's the *Encyclopedia of All Encyclopedias of All Recipes Ever Conceived Since the Beginning of the World, Together with Their Main Variations*. As you can imagine, it's pretty thorough."

"Must have been expensive."

"Yes, but well worth it, especially with its Length of Meal option which lets you set Ingestion Duration anywhere from 5 nanoseconds all the way up to 18 hours for feasts you really want to linger over. And the Intensity scale has an orgasmic level that's new this year. It makes a good meal just that much more enjoyable."

"Too bad I'm not hungry."

"You don't have to be. I also have a Virtual Hunger program that will give you all the appetite you could want."

"I don't want to be hungry right now. I'll just wander around a little more, thank you. What's this, a broom closet?"

"I like to keep things clean."

"In your mind?"

"Of course. Virtual cleanliness is just as important as the real thing."

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"Have you got a bathroom here?"

"What would I be doing with a bathroom in my mind? And what would you need it for?"

"A virtual bathroom will do just as well. My, what a lot of doors. And what is this? A winding staircase! I wonder where it leads."

"Don't go down there!"

"Take it easy. I always enjoy looking around men's minds. Now this is interesting. It gets darker as I go down."

"Stay out of there! That staircase leads to the recesses of my mind. Can't you read the sign? It says, 'Unconscious Level. Entry Strictly Forbidden Except to Licensed Psychotherapists.' I will thank you to keep your nose out of my personal private business."

"Come on, don't be such a spoilsport. I'm down there already. I just want a peek at what's behind this odd little door..."

"Don't touch that door!"

"Don't get so excited. What makes you think you got anything I ain't seen before?"

"SHUT THAT DOOR!"

There was the virtual sound of a door opening. Then Myra said, "Greck!"

"I beg your pardon?" Gersten said.

"'Greck' is the sort of expression my ex-husband Hubert used when he came across something especially nasty. I think what I just saw qualifies."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I should think not. You *are* a dirty bit of business, aren't you?"

"I'm perfectly normal. All men's heads have cellar rooms like that."

"You know, I don't think you know men's heads very well. The last guy's head I was in, it was just one big room, you know? No upstairs or downstairs. And this room was empty except for a pile of stuff in one corner. Do you know what it was?"

"Women's dismembered bodies?"

"Golf trophies! Isn't that a scream?"

"I see nothing funny about it. Get out of my Unconscious!"

"In a moment."

"What are you doing now?"

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"Looking around. This doorway here...It leads to the Pleasure Center! I knew you had to have one! Everyone's got one!"

"Leave my Pleasure Center alone! And what do you mean, everybody's got one?"

"Well, everybody whose head I've been in."

"What were you doing in other men's Pleasure Centers?"

"Well, you know. Someone hires you to go into their Pleasure Center, you don't spend a whole lot of time asking them what they want you to do there, you know what I mean?"

"I'm not sure."

"Want me to spell it out?"

"No! Why do you do that sort of thing?"

"Well, it's a job, you know?"

"No, I don't know!"

"You've led a sheltered life."

"So what do you do when you get into a guy's head?"

Myra hesitated, then said, "Look, maybe we shouldn't talk about this."

"No, no, it's all right, tell me."

"You're not going to like it...Okay, a guy usually asks me to sit down, make myself comfortable. Sometimes he offers me a drink. It's not a real drink, of course, it's a virtual drink, but it helps break the ice. Sometimes he'll offer me a joint or two, or a couple of snorts of coke."

"That's against the law."

"Real coke is, but not virtual coke."

"What do you do then?"

"We fool around a little."

"What do you mean, you fool around? There aren't any bodies involved, what can you do?"

"I'm trying to tell you, aren't I? What's this?"

"Wait a minute, what are you doing?"

"It looks so nice and pink in here. I think I'll just touch it..."

"Don't touch anything!"

"Whassa matter, don't you like being touched?"

"Not by people who are in my mind without my permission, no! What are you doing now?"

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"It's so nice here, I think I'll just take a little nap. Catch you in a few minutes, lover."

GERSTON WAS in a high state of nervous perplexity. He didn't know what to do. And just to make it worse, at that moment there was a violent knocking sound at the apartment door, the real one, not the virtual one. Gerston knew at once by its slightly hollow sound and over-determined air of realism that it was even more trouble coming his way. And that was really too much.

"I'm busy!" he shouted. "Go away!"

"Open the door," a voice said, "before we kick it in. This is the Thought Police."

"I never heard of the Thought Police. Are you sure — "

"Of course I'm sure, dummy. Open this door or we'll break it down and kick your forehead in."

"You have no right!" Gerson cried. "It's not legal!"

"The hell it's not! We have a search warrant that permits us to invade your house, and another that allows us ingress to your mind."

"But why are you doing this?

"We have information that you are harboring a dangerous criminal."

"In my apartment?"

"Don't play dumb with me, sucker! You're hiding her in your mind!"

Gerston took a moment off from his panic to wonder, how could they know that? "Don't be silly," he said, fighting for time, space, air. "I'd never do that."

"We know she's in there. An alien sex criminal from a faraway planet. A sex criminal who calls herself Myra. Am I getting through to you? Do yourself a favor, buddy. It's probably not your fault. Let us in and we'll get this cleared up quicklike."

Gerston said, in a deadened voice, " I swear I didn't know she was a criminal. All right, come on in, officers."

He unlocked the apartment door. Three bulky officers in dark blue uniforms came in. They wore silver badges on their shirts which read Thought Police, Squad Three. One of them wore sergeant's stripes.

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"Permission to enter?" the sergeant said, tapping Gerston's forehead with a squat forefinger.

"Go ahead, you're going to do it anyway."

The doors of Gerston's mind opened. The three policemen entered in a flurry of virtual black leather jackets and calf-length jackboots. Their feet were dirty and their faces grim. They were frightening despite their virtuality.

"It's too crowded, please hurry!" Gerston cried.

The policemen searched through Gerston's mind. They swept memory-objects off simulated shelves and knocked down the portraits of ancestors so remote that Gerston hadn't known he had them. Their boots made marks on the pink scuff-sensitive surface of Gerston's mind. Their crude remarks lingered near the virtual ceiling like clouds of ill-smelling gas.

"Is this going to take long?" Gerston asked through gritted teeth.

"Better get used to it," the sergeant said.

There was a crash. "Sorry, chief," one of the policemen said. "I dropped one of his golf trophies."

"She's not here," another policeman reported. "We've searched all of the way down to the rotting depths of the stupid insanity he calls his deepest self. We'd a found her if she'd been hiding there."

"Damnation!" the sergeant said. "She got away again! But at least we got you, sucker."

They exited Gerston's mind. A smile of great amusement appeared on the sergeant's tough cop face with the little busted red veins and the tufted eyebrows.

Gerston opened his mouth to speak. Suddenly he froze. Everything around him was arrested in mid-motion. There was a flash of light.

The policemen disappeared. Gerston goggled, unable to make sense out of this.

And then a voice spoke in his head.

"Hi!" the voice said. "We have interrupted your entry into Deep Blue Sleep to bring you a preview of our unlimited psychic adventures for the young at heart. Did you enjoy what you just experienced? Want more like it? Just signify your assent. Trained operators will pick up your inference and put the charge on your credit card."

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So that was what all this was, Gerston thought. This was outrageous!

Aloud he said, "I demand to see someone in charge."

A tall thin man with glinting spectacles appeared in his mind.

"Supervisor Olson at your service. Is there a problem?"

"Damned well right there's a problem! I never chose any psychic adventure program. A little sleep was all I was after! And even if I had selected an adventure, what right did you have to humiliate me by sending this Myra person to invade my mind? And what was this police thing?"

The supervisor said, "Let me just look at your record, sir."

Swiftly he plucked a card out of Gerson's mind, read it, replaced it.

"It's all right, sir, we do have your assent, right here. That is your signature, isn't it?"

Gerston squinted. "It looks like it. But I never agreed to anything like this."

"But you did, sir. I hope you won't force me to tell you when you in fact signed for the service."

"Go ahead, tell me!"

"It was just before you died."

"I'm dead?" Gerston asked.

"That is the case, sir."

"But how could I be dead?"

The supervisor shrugged. "It happens."

"If I'm dead," Gerston said, "how come I'm still here?"

"We have our ways of keeping the dead alive."

"I don't want to be dead!" Gerston wailed.

"Sir, please be quiet, you'll wake up the others."

"The others? What others?"

But the supervisor was gone and the lights were beginning to fade.

Lights in his own apartment? In his mind? Fading? At first he thought he was going to die. Then he remembered he was already dead. Or were they lying to him about that? And if this was death, what lay beyond it? And anyhow, how could he be sure he was dead? Might this not just be the continuation of one of their dream adventures? It would be just like them to lie to him, tell him he was dead, when actually he was just...just...

Suddenly Gerston didn't know what to think. For now something rather strange seemed to be taking place.

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In her new book No Go the Bogeyman, *British scholar Marina Warner set out to study male characters in fairy tales... and wound up on the theme of ogres "since princes were on the whole too insipid." Richard Bowes sat down to watch the film* Basquiat *and was inspired to write this lovely story, which investigates the roles of men in fairy tales in an entirely different manner.*

Mr. Bowes is a librarian and a sometime antiques dealer who lives in New York. His most recent book, Minions of the Moon, *assembles into novel form the Kevin Grierson stories we've been so lucky to publish over the past years.*

A Huntsman Passing By

By Richard Bowes

1.

GOOD EVENING! HERE I AM back working the door at an exclusive event. Like old times. It's been a while since we met. I'm not sure anyone else can see you in your coat of moonlight. Or what any of them would understand if they did.

The secret behind my being able to recognize you is dyslexia. It's how I found my identity and my job, how I got married and had kids. If I'd been able to read, God knows where I'd be now.

My not being able to write things down is why my memory got good. It's why, even though I haven't done doors for a few years, I can still remember every face and name on the Lower Manhattan Art circuit.

Tonight they're celebrating the memory of the late Seventies. And back then no Downtown event was complete without me. So when they organized the party for the release of Victor Sparger's *Raphael!* I was asked to provide security for old time's sake.

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The idea of this event bothered me and I wasn't going to do it. Then something I read to my kids recently made me change my mind. That and something my wife told me. My wife, when we were wondering if you'd be here, told me to say hello.

Raphael! is one painter directing a film about another. People say that's kind of a culmination of that whole scene. The movie's set downtown twenty years ago when the art world was the buzz in New York's ear. Big money changed hands. Large reputations got made. Victor Sparger was in right from the start. Painter and sculptor, very smart and pretty talented, he knew all the right names: Picasso and Braque, Warhol and Geldhazer. He was and is a prudent man. He invested his earnings, cultivated his image, bought real estate. Then out of nowhere came Louis Raphael. And in magazine articles about the scene Victor Sparger suddenly looked like a footnote.

In this film, Sparger gives the world a movie about Louis Raphael. He intends that people interested in Raphael will find out about him through Sparger. It's not exactly crooked or illegal. But it's unjust in some way that's beyond the reach of human law.

That kind of thing only gets resolved in fairy tales. Which I take it is why you are here before me in that blue and silver dress on this Bowery sidewalk. And why I bow you into Ling's Fortune Cookie. You're on everybody's guest list whether they know it or not.

The Fortune Cookie is new since the last time you were around. Back then the site was still an upscale gay baths. Now it's a Chinese restaurant with waitresses who happen to be Asian guys. Drag is the gimmick of the moment.

From inside the door we get to see the aging, slightly raddled survivors of the Mudd Club plus their younger tricks and camp followers. The walls are hung with shots from the movie.

Some of the stills are of Raphael's paintings. Out of backgrounds of dark carnival colors, Caribbean faces stare. Like they're looking out of a deep, rich night into this bright room. Not angry. Not happy. Glaring not at but right through the viewer. And scrawled on the canvases are phrases in spanglish and Pidgin French, slogans that when you decipher them are like bizarre ads. "Breathe Oxygen Every Day," that one over there says.

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Raphael, of course, is dead. And Sparger has yet to make his dramatic entrance. It's uncool to turn and stare at new arrivals. So everybody glances out of the corner of their eyes as the door opens. It's obvious from their reactions that they see nothing but me surveying the room. I alone am aware of you. Everyone goes back to watching the murderers.

Two of them are in the room. For an event this big, the jealous sculptor who threw his wife out the thirty-story window and the coke-crazed art dealer who tortured and butchered the fashion design student both showed up. They arrived separately and alone. Once each realized the other was here, they tried to stay as far away as possible. Like both are afraid of guilt by association.

It's the chance to witness this kind of encounter that brings out the crowds. Alert as forest animals, they watch a wife killer/sculptor powerful enough to throw almost anybody out a window, a sadist/gallery owner, sleek and taut, who could be at any throat in a moment. But those things won't happen. Not to people who have survived Max's Kansas City, The Factory and Studio 54. The craziest part is that I'm here to keep out dangerous riffraff.

In the mundane world, justice is a contest between bad luck and cold cash. The sculptor walked free, the dealer only served time for tax evasion. I almost feel sorry for the murderers. Compared to some of the guests, they seem pathetic. And theirs isn't the kind of wrong that concerns the Huntsman.

Fairy Tale Justice is sure if not always swift and the punishment is appropriate. My only question is which tale gets told tonight. You smile at the question and there's a glimmer like gold, like sunfire when you do.

Seeing that, I remember how I found my place in the world. The place where I got brought up was in the Five Towns out on Long Island. Kind of a surprise, right? But I was the tough, poor kid in the soft, rich town. In school, I got kept back once or twice. And I was big to start with.

Dyslexia, as I say, was the problem. My oldest girl has it too. Now they can actually do something. Back then when I reached ninth grade, they sent me to this old lady who sat in a little office in the cellar of the school. Just her and me.

She'd have me read and correct me. Stupid stuff. Not Dick and Jane

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but very simple sentences. It didn't seem to help and I hated her at first. Eventually I worked my way up to a book by the Grimm brothers. Those stories stuck with me. Maybe because I'd never read anything else. Or maybe because the old lady was a witch. No disrespect intended, in case you belong to the same union or something.

The characters I liked weren't the princes or princesses. In fairy tales, they're a dime a dozen. You can't tell them apart. Poor tailors and honest woodcutters didn't do it for me either. I knew what it was like to be poor if not honest.

The out-of-work soldiers, sly, smart and smoky, making deals with the devil, caught me first. Like a prophecy, you know. Because rich kids get into as much trouble as ones in the ghetto. Drugs, stolen cars, breaking and entering: whatever they did they wanted me along as protection.

But the rules are different for rich kids. When trouble came down, they all went into counseling. Thirty years ago, poor kids went in the army. Right then that meant 'Nam. I did my tour in a bad time. When it was over, I became a discharged soldier, every bit as bent and nasty and bitter as the ones in the stories. It happened the devil wasn't signing deals for souls at that moment or I would have gone that way.

Instead, I bummed around for a couple of years, then started to contact old friends. A lot of them had finished college, taken their time about it, and ended up in New York. So I followed them to this city with nothing but a dufflebag with my clothes and the only book I ever read.

But everything was in that book. New York was full of frog cabbies who were actually actor princes under a cruel spell. Cinderella waited tables in every bar. Acquaintances had started their own little kingdoms: clubs and restaurants and galleries. Sometimes those places weren't in the best neighborhoods, or the patrons forgot their good manners, or the wrong kind of people wanted to come inside. They started calling me.

Maybe a tiny bit wiser, I put the idea of the discharged soldier behind me. There's another kind of guy in a lot of the stories. He never has the major role. But I didn't want stardom. He gets different titles: forester, game keeper, the hunter. He plays key parts. And I have the feeling he's around even when he's not talked about. Every king or queen needs a royal huntsman. That at least is how it worked in the dark woods of Manhattan.

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2.

THAT'S MY SECRET identity. It's because of Rinaldo Baupre that I discovered it. And it's because of him that I first saw you in action. Rinaldo is standing over there looking, as always, like he's in pain. No, the years have not been kind to him. Drug treatment. Mental hospitals. It's like something's been tearing Mr. Baupre in two.

Sometimes with celebrities, it's amazing how much smaller they are in real life than in the media. With Rinaldo it's the opposite. I'm always surprised that he's average height and build. On first meeting, he seems pretty creepy but in no way misshapen. Inside, though, he's a dwarf, a troll.

Mr. Baupre wrote the script for *Raphael!* And he's treated his own part in Louis's life very sympathetically. It turns out he was the kid's mentor and inspiration. Lots of amazing changes have gotten rung on history.

Rinaldo was a fixture of the downtown scene, a poet, a sponger, a scene maker. And he had a legend. I mean, the name demanded one. So he was the illegitimate son of a French Resistance fighter who abandoned him and a minor Mexican muralist who died young.

Rinaldo is a critic. Twenty years ago, the art magazines kind of used him to keep watch at the crossroads where art and the underground intersected. People were starting to pay attention to the downtown scene. Victor Sparger had started getting hot. Victor had gone through a careful rebellion, done graffiti, nailed broken glass onto boards. Rinaldo Baupre had a small part in his rise. But mostly Victor managed himself.

By then I'd met Louis Raphael through a young photographer, Norah Classon. Norah loved Louis like he was a little brother. He was this skinny Caribbean kid, living on the street, bumming money and cigarettes and a couch to crash on.

I'm supposed to say I got knocked out the first time I looked at his work. Like everyone else apparently did. And that I could kick myself for not having the fifty bucks or whatever he was charging for a painting. In reality, the first time Norah talked me into letting Louis stay at my place I was pissed off because he got paint on my walls. And he was apologetic and cleaned it up.

That was shortly before Rinaldo discovered Raphael. Like Columbus

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finding America is how my wife described it. That is, America was always there, big and rich and unexploited. A lot of Indians knew about America. But Columbus talked it up where it counted.

Rinaldo was the same way. Others had the goods. But he had the contacts. And a talent for spinning. Most people can't do it. Publicity is the magic that spins gold. And once Mr. Baupre had done that for you, he never let you forget it.

Rinaldo was always real nice with me. He was too smart to insult headwaiters or gate keepers. To our faces. And I was always polite enough. But I'd gotten to see him in action with Norah Classon.

To give him credit, he saw what she had done and made sure that others noticed too. Of course, then he wanted her first born. For Norah in the days before she had children, that meant her work. And he claimed a major chunk. "Oh, this is beautiful! Darling, I must have it!" That kind of thing. He told people that he hadn't just discovered Norah Classon, he had shaped her art.

Norah and I were stepping out back then. She had gotten a one woman Soho show. He wrote the auction catalog and wanted his name bigger than hers. When she objected, he decided to sink the whole deal.

One night in the packed bathroom at the Mudd Club, I was trying to fight my way through to the can. And I heard the unmistakable voice of Mr. Baupre saying, "I'm the only hose in this hick town gas station. You want fuel, baby, you line up here. The spot right where you're standing is where I discovered Louis Raphael. You don't know who he is!"

Someone said something I couldn't make out, a couple of other people got mentioned. Then I heard Norah's name and Rinaldo said. "Not if she begged. Ms. Classon is over and done. She's screwing doormen now. The next step is busboys."

And, yeah, I saw red. But I knew that decking Rinaldo wouldn't help Norah. These days I've got a private investigator license. I'm entitled to carry a gun if I ever want to. But a Swiss Army knife is about all I usually pack. Back then, I was still learning. I already knew enough, though, to stand aside and wait.

As Rinaldo made his way out of room, he looked at something in his hand, grimaced and threw it aside. Curious, I recovered it and stepped out of the club. Under a light on Milk Street, I unfolded a matchbook for the

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Thunder Ranch Bar and Grill in Wilkes-Barre. Thinking it was a joke or a camp, I was ready to toss it aside.

And this figure appeared. A radiant being, I guess I'd say. My first thought was that you were an acid flashback from the sixties. Then you spoke one word. What you said was, "RUMPLESTILTSKIN."

I didn't remember any hunter in that story. But I went home and reread it slowly, taking my time with every word like always. The girl whose future depends on her weaving straw into gold and the little man who appears and does it for her fit perfectly. She becomes queen but he's going to take her child if she can't guess his name. I still didn't see where I fit in. Then I reached the part where the queen sends out a messenger to scour the countryside for the secret name.

He's the one who comes back just before the little man appears to claim the baby and says, "At the edge of the forest where the fox and the hare say good night to each other...."

What he goes on to tell her is that he's seen a bonfire and a little man dancing and heard the song with the name Rumplestiltskin in it. But that stuff about the fox and the rabbit gives him away. He's a hunter. It makes sense. Who else would she have sent out to comb the woods?

So I made a couple of calls, took a little trip down to Pennsylvania. I found the trailer park outside Wilkes-Barre where a certain Mona Splevetsky lived.

Oh, there was a dance and a song all right. Thursdays were polka night at the Thunder Ranch and I got her drunk and she boogied and told me all about her son Marvin.

For people like Rinaldo their most important creation is themselves. With anyone else I would have called it the old and sorry tale of an unhappy kid who leaves his past behind. But I wasted little sympathy on Mr. Baupre.

Unlike Rumplestiltskin, Rinaldo didn't put his foot through the floor when Norah Classon said the name Marvin Splevetsky. He was real angry. But it had so much power over him that he begged her to keep it secret and gave her back her career.

3.

A reminder of my next case is also here at Ling's Fortune Cookie tonight. That scary looking lady waiting for Victor Spanger to appear is

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Edith Crann, the producer of *Raphael!* The guy with her is an Italian industrialist. Her new husband. Edith's face is amazing, tragic but unlined, pained but cold, crazy but contained.

Bankrolling the film was a way of enhancing her investments. Edith Crann was the first important buyer of Louis's work. She had no idea of why it was good. But Rinaldo advised her and took a commission.

In the movie, Rinaldo and Victor have turned Edith into Louis Raphael's muse. It seems that the tragedy of losing her daughter is supposed to have made her sensitive to the plight of a kid thrown out on the street by his family.

Back at the time their daughter disappeared, I worked for Edith and her first husband Harris Crann. I had been hired as a bodyguard-chauffeur for young Alycia. It didn't take me long to recognize Mrs. Crann.

Everyone around knew she was an evil queen or a wicked stepmother. The only question was which story. Cinderella? Hansel and Gretel? I heard bartenders and waitresses, people who had worked for her, actually discuss this.

Alycia was seven years old when we met. Her picture was in the papers all the time. She attended Broadway openings. She was at Met galas. Any little girl likes to dress up. All children are thrilled to be out late at night. Little twitches of adulthood. But mostly kids have childhood. Missing that is death as sure as having your lungs and liver cut out.

One day I heard Mrs. Crann talk about her daughter to an interviewer. "We have long discussions about what she's going to wear. I never push her. This is what she wants." And the kid said nothing. Just looked at herself in the mirror, tried on a little powder, as if she didn't hear.

As a huntsman, I watched the animals. Like in the tales, they spoke the truth while people lied. Mr. Jimbo was the springer spaniel, brown and white, that followed the kid around. Alycia had named him when she was three. Whenever the mother put her hand on her daughter's mass of careful curls, the dog tensed. I understood what he was saying: he had taken on a job that made him feel bad inside.

Another time Mrs. Crann told someone, "I talk to Alycia in ways I never had anyone talk to me. It's amazing. I come into her room the first thing in the morning and we discuss what she has scheduled for that day." Queen Milly was the Persian cat. She got up from Alycia's lap where she

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was sitting and slunk out of the room. I understood: even the cat couldn't stand to listen to this.

The parakeet actually spoke, of course. "Hi gorgeous!" it said to Edith Crann.

She gave her scariest smile and asked, "Who's the fairest in the land?"

"You are!" said the parakeet. "Lady. You are!"

Then the bird flew into the next room and lighted on the little girl's shoulder. "Hi gorgeous," it said and whistled.

"Fairest...", it started to say and fell silent as the mother appeared. Her face was like a mask. But the eyes behind it were wild with anger.

Two things finally did it for me. First was seeing Alycia trying to skip like every seven-year-old does. Except she was wearing high heels and tripped. The second was the picture of her in a leather outfit. She was posed in what was supposed to be a worldly and sophisticated way. The idea, maybe, was to be cute. But her eyes under false lashes looked lost and desperate.

In Fairy Tales, everyone's a prince or a princess. Stepmothers move in to perform wicked deeds. In real life no one's a princess and parents do their own dirty work. The parts of the story are just that, parts. They're all shaken up and reassembled when you actually encounter them.

What Edith Crann was doing was stealing her daughter's most precious possession, her childhood. Seeing her parents, I knew that Edith herself probably hadn't had one. They were a loveless pair of sticks. I almost felt sorry for Edith. Alycia didn't like those grandparents either. I know because we talked all the time in the car. She sat up front with me. Going to her mother's parents, she'd fall silent. They'd look at her and wouldn't crack a smile.

With her father's side of the family it was different. Harris Crann's family had gotten bigger and dumber with each generation. Harris was six foot tall and Ivy League. Waspy and stiff as a board. If he saw what was being done to his kid, he never let on.

His parents were, maybe, five foot six but big on museum and opera boards. And they had established a charitable foundation. In the city, they had this huge co-op up on Riverside Drive, several floors, countless rooms. Kind of pretentious. But when they saw their granddaughter, their eyes lit up.

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Once I took her up there and they weren't home. Alycia smiled which she didn't do a lot and beckoned me down a hall like she was showing me this great secret. We went up some stairs and into this whole separate apartment within the larger one. That's where I met her great-grandparents.

Theodore and Heddy Kranneki were ancient and tiny. They had founded the family fortune long ago. They spent part of the year in the Homeland. They had done lots of work for the independence movement there. Probably they were little to start with but now they were no bigger than their granddaughter. They were entertaining some friends equally old and small. And smart still, with amazingly bright eyes behind bifocals. They looked at the kid in her leather outfit as she tottered on heels to hug them. Their eyes met mine and we all understood exactly what had to happen.

So now we had the wicked stepmother and the magic little people in place. And the huntsman. That's all the identity the story gives. He's a royal employee, as I see it. One day he's told to take the little girl out in the woods, kill her and bring back her liver and lungs as proof he's done it.

The boss's wife has given him the orders. But he looks at the little girl and she's so beautiful he can't. Thinking that the wild animals will kill her, the huntsman lets her go and brings back a young boar's liver and lungs. These the queen has the cook boil in salted water then eats. I'll be fair to Edith Crann, she was into more sophisticated dining.

The day came when I was supposed to drive Alycia up to the Hotel Pierre. Edith's parents were going to meet her and take her on vacation. Alycia wasn't looking forward to that at all.

Under everything her mother had done to her, she had the beauty that's given to all kids, however the world may bend and warp it. When we were in the car together, we used to sing songs like I do with my own kids now. Old corny stuff. "Singing in the Rain" when it was raining. "A Little Help from My Friends," when one of us was down. Or I'd tell her stories.

That particular day I told her Snow White. Not because she didn't know the story, but for the same reason I'm telling you: to make it clear in my own mind what led up to this situation and what will happen afterward.

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Alycia understood. She was crying when I came to the part about the huntsman and the woods. We got up to the Pierre and there was a delivery truck broken down right in front of the hotel just as I'd been told there would be. As instructed, I parked down the block. The kid got out and stood on the curb while I went around to get her bags out of the trunk. In their prime, Ted and Heddy Kranneki must really have been something. I turned away and on a gray morning there was a flash like sunlight reflecting on a passing rearview mirror. Magic. When I turned back, Alycia was gone.

It was THE hot New York story for a couple of weeks. Cops grilled me. Reporters wanted my story. The question was whether I was an idiot or an accomplice. I had expected that. Alycia's picture was in the papers and on TV. Posters were everywhere. The thing was, Edith Crann couldn't help herself. The picture she used showed the kid in a slinky dress and a tortured expression.

People began to wonder about little Alycia's home life. That summer there was a nasty mayoral primary and a racial killing in Brooklyn, the Mets arose from the dead and ran for the pennant, someone named Louis Raphael came out of nowhere and took the art world by storm. Rumors circulated that Alycia had been seen in various places. But no new leads appeared. The Crann kidnapping story quietly died.

That summer also Norah Classon and I both started going out with other people. Somehow, it didn't make me as happy as I thought it was going to. And it didn't give her more time for her career as she thought it would. I heard that she was having booze troubles. Probably the same stories were going around about me. A couple, friends of us both, invited me out to the Hamptons for the weekend because Norah was staying nearby. But when I dropped around to see her, she had left for Fire Island. When I took the ferry over there, she was gone.

There is no tale where we see the huntsman get his rewards. Believe me, I've looked and I know. But that Sunday evening I took the late train back to Penn Station. Walking underground along the platform of the Long Island Railway, I wasn't paying much attention to what went on. In the gloom and humidity, I saw a figure of light. And when I looked your way, you pointed at the window of a car on the train I'd just gotten off.

Inside was a commotion, a bunch of conductors and nosy citizens standing over a sleeping woman. She looked vulnerable, beautiful, her hair long and loose. I got right onto the car, told them I knew her. They

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seemed doubtful. So I bent over Norah and kissed her. She woke up, put her arms around my neck and said. "Prince!" And I picked her up and carried her off the train, up all the stairs and back home.

Who's to say that the huntsman didn't get to marry above his station and have three beautiful kids? What tale says he didn't form a nice, discreet little security business, or that his wife hasn't had a good career showing her work, teaching.

When our oldest kid was little. I told her that story with certain things edited out. But I did mention the lady in the moonlight dress. When my daughter asked me who you were, I said to ask her mother.

My wife also was raised on Fairy Tales. Maybe that's what the marriage has going for it. But the book she had as a kid is different. French. There aren't a whole lot of Fairies in Grimm, in spite of the title. The French stories are choked with them. Fairy Godmothers especially. Even when they're not mentioned, you figure they're operating behind the scene.

For a long while Norah wouldn't tell me much about her Fairy Godmother. Lately, though, she's said a couple of things about you. She loved Louis, like I say, and this film has bothered the hell out of her. Which brings us to the matter at hand. People are stirring. Victor Sparger is about to make his entrance.

4.

LOUIS RAPHAEL got a lot of money very fast. It's too bad. He was basically a sweet kid at the start. His stuff grows on me, like that life-size picture in the movie still on the wall. The staring face is almost familiar, the words are like slogans you heard in dreams. He came out of nowhere and caught the attention of the world. Everyone wanted to be his friend. Then something else caught their attention and he was left strung out, crazy and deep in the hole. Nobody wanted to know him. Then he was dead, way shy of thirty. Now everyone wants to be his friend again.

That particular scene is now history. The boat has sailed, the balloons have gone up, the reputations have all been made. And anyone in the future who wants to set a movie in New York in 1980 will make it look like a Louis Raphael painting. Like they use Gershwin tunes when they want to say it's 1930.

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The downtown ethic is that if you're not moving you're meat. Enter Victor Sparger. Victor was the artist who had made all the right choices, been in the right places, said the right things, donated to the right charity, bought property at the right moment. In life he had been no friend to Raphael. As a rival, he was nowhere.

But with Louis dead, Victor saw his chance to swallow him whole. He could make sure that anyone interested in Louis Raphael would have to go through Victor Sparger.

That's when his real talents came into play. He tied up all the rights to Louis's life. He enlisted the help of Rinaldo Baupre and Edith Crann. He oversaw Rinaldo's script. And in it he is Louis's best friend, his big brother, his idol in bad times. The fact that back then Victor was busy jumping on the fingers of everybody who tried to crawl out of the hole disappears from history.

Rumplestiltskin, after they guess his name, stamps so hard he puts his foot through the floor and rips himself in two trying to pull himself free. Watching Rinaldo Baupre tonight, I remember his mother telling me how Marvin Splevetsky went to New York to become a poet, a famous writer. Instead he's a supporting player in the story of others' lives. And it's tearing him apart.

Owning Louis Raphael's work has given Edith Crann a certain claim to existence. She is the sum of her possessions. She accumulates because she can't help herself. In that same way she once tried to collect the soul of a child.

A short time after Alycia disappeared, Mrs. Crann started sporting a nasty little smile. It reminded me of poison apples and long comas. I worried about the kid. Tonight, though, Edith seems nervous. In the story, the queen's spell is broken, Snow White wakes up and falls in love. The Wicked Queen is invited to her wedding and can't refuse to go. For the wedding, iron slippers get heated over a fire. When the queen sees them, she can't help herself. She puts them on and dances until her heart bursts. Did today's mail bring Edith her invitation to Alycia's wedding? Norah and I just got ours.

Like I said, my wife grew up with a different book. Sometimes the stories are different versions of the ones I know. I've been reading them to my kids. As much of an education for me as for them. The other night, I sat down with the four-year-old and read him one I'd never looked at

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before, the French Little Red Riding Hood. In the story I remember, she was Little Red Cap.

I'd already been asked to do this gig and certain things about it bothered me. But I couldn't have told you what. As I read, though, I began to understand exactly what was wrong. Then I got to the end of the story and there was no huntsman who happens to be passing by. He's the one who rushes in, cuts open the belly of the wolf and saves the kid and her grandmother. In my wife's book, they get eaten and stay eaten.

It's one of the big hunter parts in the stories and it's not in the French book. All they have is some piece of smartass poetry telling us not to talk to strangers.

That bothered me until I remembered that no Fairy Godmother appeared dropping clues in Rumplestiltskin. But you were there. You're not in Little Red Riding Hood either. So I figure since you showed up today it may mean there's a place for me in this version of the story.

Now there's a stir in the room. Victor Sparger, unshaven to just the fashionable degree, walks among us in a two-thousand-dollar workman's jumpsuit. He's smiling and sleek. The way you look, I guess, after you've swallowed someone whole. And I don't know how I'm going to cut open this particular beast.

See him one way and Louis Raphael was no innocent child. He'd come off the street and that part of his life never left him. Another way of looking at it, though, is that nobody is more trusting than a street person who puts his life in strangers' hands again and again. Or than the artist who shows everybody in the world his riches. Almost asking to be eaten whole.

As I think about that, your hand moves, a wand flashes like a laser. Something moves behind Victor and I realize the eyes in the Raphael painting have shifted. They stare, haunted, trapped, at Victor Sparger. The graffiti now says, "In Prison There Is Nothing to Breathe." And the face is Louis Raphael's.

Everyone: Rinaldo and Edith, the murderers and the Chinese drag waitresses, the battle-hardened Downtown circuit riders who you can bet have seen a lot, turn toward Sparger and say things like, "Oh, Victor, what a big film you've got!"

Sparger smiles, false modesty and vindictive triumph on his face. And he replies, "All the better to eat you with." Or words to that effect.

Then people see the staring face, read the words on the picture above

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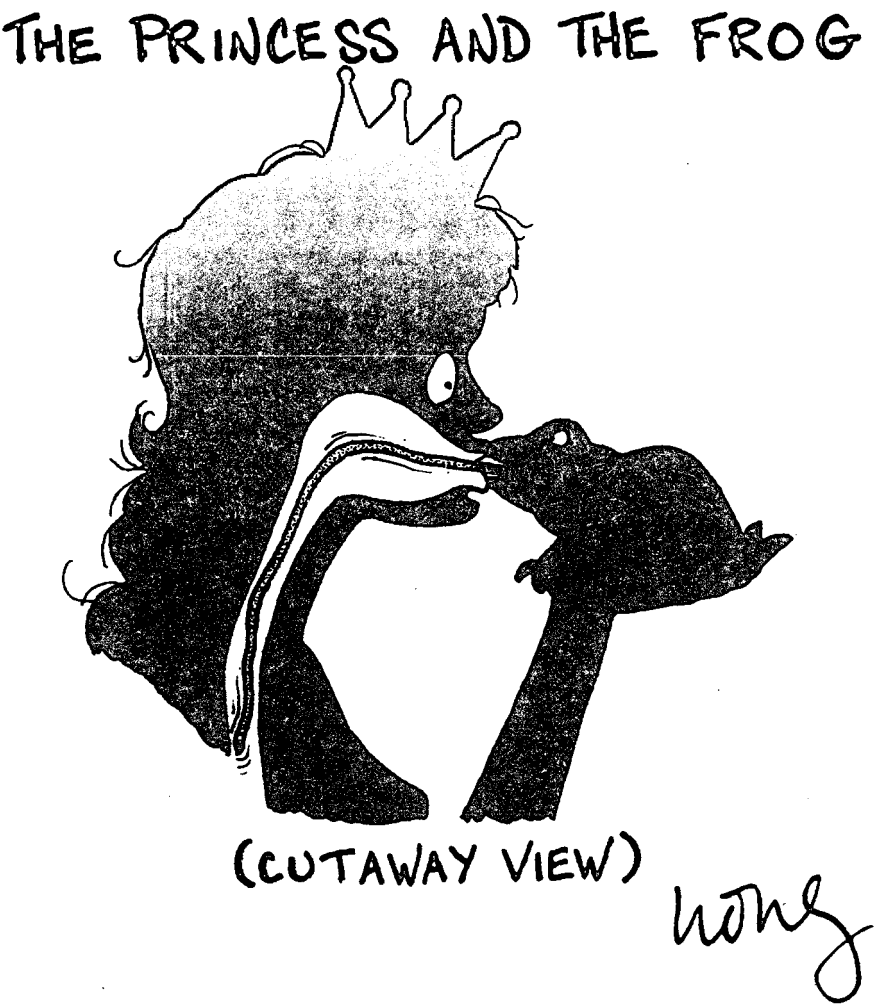
Victor's head. You nod to me that this is the moment and I reach into my pocket. They say that a Swiss Army Knife can kill in a dozen ways. I've made it a point to learn none of them. But for this it's perfect. I step forward and make a single cut across the front of the still. And, simple as magic, out leaps the one trapped inside. ☙



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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Portrait of Jennie, by Robert Nathan, Tachyon Publications, 1998, $14.

ALL TOO often when you read a classic story, you find yourself enjoying it in a way the author undoubtedly never intended. You think, "How quaint," or, "Yes, I can see why this was considered so good, or innovative, in its day," but you're reading it with a certain amount of condescension. Rather than being caught up with the immediacy of the story, the characters, the setting, you're viewing them through a patronizing filter that sets everything at a distance.

Then there are those stories that truly transcend the boundaries of their era, timeless tales as relevant and expressive now as they were the day they were written, even if that day lay decades in the past.

Portrait of Jennie is definitely one of the latter. And it really surprises me that I've missed the book until now because I try to pay attention to this sort of story. For somewhat contemporary touchstones, consider Richard Matheson, or Jack Finney, or Alan Brennert's classic *Time and Chance*. It's not that Robert Nathan's short novel is exactly like any of those books, but it does have a similar feel in terms of characterization, how the story unfolds, and how it deals with time travel in a unique and heartfelt (rather than scientific) way.

The narrator is a destitute artist who meets a young girl by chance in a park. Upon parting, she tells him about a wishing game she plays. When he asks her what it is that she wishes for, she says "I wish you'd wait for me to grow up. But you won't I guess."

So begins a strange relationship. The artist keeps meeting the girl over the next year or so, but whenever he does, she's older than the last time — years older. He

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realizes that, somehow, she's traveling in time. How everything works out, I won't tell you, but I will say that Nathan plays fair throughout. More importantly, he's crafted a beautiful book here — one that brings to life the earlier part of this century, exploring creativity, character, and the paradoxical nature of time. He manages to be sentimental without being cloying, literate without overwriting, and passionate without a need for graphic detail.

If you've somehow missed this over the years, as I did, don't let this reprint edition slip by. Should your local bookseller be unable to get it for you, try writing to Tachyon at 1459 18th Street, San Francisco, CA 94107.

Seize the Night, by Dean Koontz, Bantam, 1998, $26.95

Since we started out following this series by Koontz in these pages, I thought we might as well check in to see how the second volume fares — especially since it relates to the Nathan title with another take on time paradoxes.

Seize the Night is narrated by Chris Snow, a young man we first met in *Fear Nothing* who suffers from a rare genetic disorder that leaves him dangerously vulnerable to almost any form of light (sunshine, computer and TV screens, fluorescent and regular bulbs, etc.). Once again set in the night world that Snow inhabits, the story this time around is that children are disappearing from seemingly tranquil Moonlight Bay. The police appear to be more concerned with hiding the fact than capturing the killer. But if the police won't investigate, Snow and his friends will.

The trail soon leads them to the deserted military base of Fort Wyvern, and they no longer know if they're dealing with a serial killer or some genetic changeling created in the labs that lie under the abandoned fort. By the end of the book, we've delved a little further into the governmental experiments in genetics introduced in the earlier book, but things get more complicated still with a generous helping of time travel paradoxes added to the stew.

Present here are most of Koontz's strengths: the clean prose, the fast pace, the snappy dialogue, the fascinating speculations into things not quite of this world, but perhaps closer to reality than we might like to think, given the recent advances in genetics and the other sciences. But something still

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seems to be missing. The new novel is longer than *Fear Nothing*, but it doesn't have as much meat. It's not so much a sophomore slump (which occurs all too often with the middle book of a trilogy) as that the characters aren't really affected by all that goes on (and there are some staggering things that go on here). Puzzles are unraveled, secrets left over from the earlier book are deepened, but the characters themselves don't change or grow from their experiences.

Because of that, *Seize the Night* reads more like an installment in an adventure series. An excellent, fast-paced, keeps-you-on-the-edge-of-your-seat adventure, mind you, but I missed the depth of characterization I've come to expect in a Koontz novel. I'm hopeful that'll come to the fore in the third and final volume of the series.

The Gumshoe, the Witch, and the Virtual Corpse, by Keith Hartman, Meisha Merlin, 1999, $16.

If you can get past the unwieldy (and rather too cutesy) title, there's a fine debut novel here by Keith Hartman. What kind of novel, I'm at a little of a loss to say. Equal arguments can be made that it's a police procedural, a contemporary Wiccan fantasy, a gay PI novel, a near future sf thriller, a novel of social commentary, and even, in the sections from the point of view of one character, a YA coming of age story.

In the end, it's a bit of them all, I suppose, which is part of what made me enjoy it so much. I love a book that breaks down the walls between genres, that just tells a story, the author trusting himself and the story enough to let it go wherever it leads him.

Here the story begins with a series of mysterious, occult-related murders set in a near future or alternate world, where magic (of Wicca/shamanistic variety) is real and a certain tension lies between the practitioners of it and those who follow more traditional religions. As the murders continue, that tension escalates into armed confrontations between the more militant of these groups, and Hartman does a fine job of exploring the ramifications of the case and the growing social upheavals as they impact upon the investigating officers and other characters.

But that bent toward strong characterization for even the smaller players does have a downside. There's a lot of point-of-view swapping throughout the book; some viewpoints don't appear to

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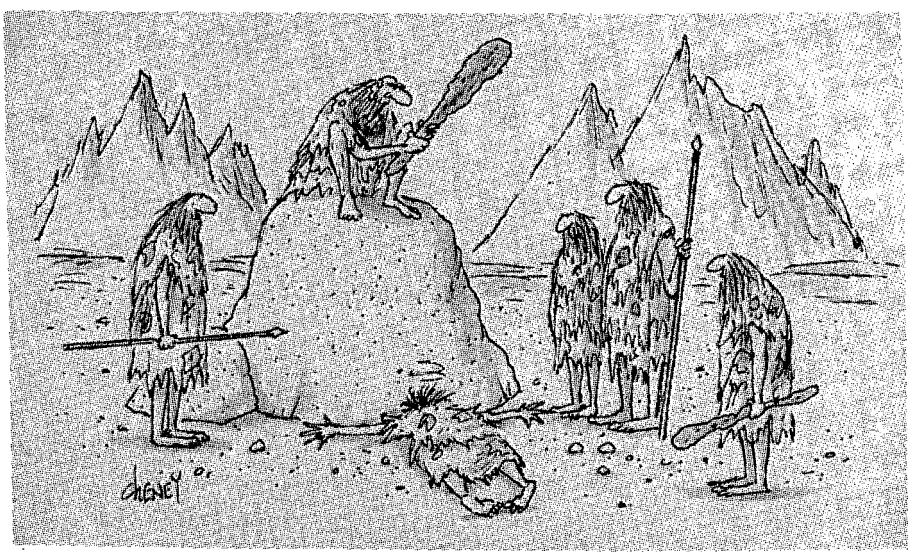
have any connection to the main story at first, and a handful of others are present only to explain things (those from the villain's p.o.v.). The former begin to coalesce into one fascinating narrative about a third of the way through, while the latter are only momentarily distracting.

Without getting into details for fear of giving away too much, I was stopped cold by a moral question that arises at the end of the book when we find out who's behind the murders, and why they were committed. I still don't know quite how I feel about what the murderer did. Obviously, it was despicable and one can't condone it, but it's the mark of a good book when you can still understand, and in some way even empathize, with a character such as that.

The Gumshoe, the Witch, and the Virtual Corpse is, like its title, a somewhat busy book, but there's enough payoff in characterization, story, and ideas to make the trip through its pages a real pleasure.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.



"Case dismissed! Defendant issued a warning!"

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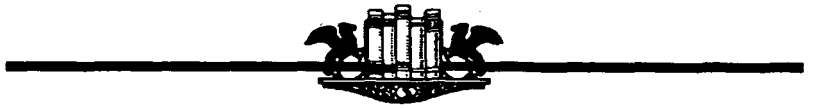

BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

The Good Old Stuff, edited by Gardner Dozois, St. Martin's Press/ Griffin, 1998, $15.95.

The Good New Stuff, edited by Gardner Dozois, St. Martin's Press/ Griffin, 1999, $15.95.

A Deepness in the Sky, by Vernor Vinge, Tor, 1999, $27.95.

THIS MIGHT come as a surprise to readers who have been following my commentary in these pages over the years, but I'm a dedicated devotee of adventure fiction. That's right: the stuff of full-blooded action, colorful settings, and breakneck pacing, heavy on the plot and light on the more cerebral literary concerns. Of course, like many readers, that's the stuff on which I cut my teeth — Robert Louis Stevenson, Alexandre Dumas, Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert E. Howard, Edmond Hamilton. And I've never lost my taste for it. Images from Carl Stephenson's "Leiningen Versus the Ants" and Jack London's "To Build a Fire" will live vividly in my memory forever.

I might argue that more complex and ambitious fiction — say, Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, an intricate literary masterpiece — ultimately offers greater pleasure (not to mention insight, wisdom, etc.) than a simpler page-turner, however well-crafted, but I'd be the last to deny the power of a good adventure story, or to suggest that the adventure story isn't a legitimate and enriching form of literature. Its pleasures should not be considered guilty.

On the other hand, I will admit that I'm among those who think "they don't write 'em like they used to." Often when the mood is upon me for a gripping plot of intrigue and suspense, I can't find anything contemporary to satisfy it. Frequently the prose is just too ham-handed, the plotting too

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predictable, the characters too bland (or the storytelling not good enough to hold me despite such deficiencies). A couple of recent examples come to mind: Wilbur Smith's *The Seventh Scroll* and Walt Becker's *Link*, both of which should have pleased me a lot more than they did, given the provocative archaeological premises with which they started. The veteran Smith performs better than first-timer Becker, but they both fall back too often on lazy contrivances and naked cliché when just a touch of original thought would have made a tremendous difference. Robert E. Howard or F. Marion Crawford could out-write either of these guys on a bad day.

So now Gardner Dozois, an editor not to be ignored, presents two volumes of what he dubs "Adventure SF in the Grand Tradition," one volume drawing on the period from the late forties through the very early seventies — *The Good Old Stuff* — and the other picking up in the late seventies and carrying us through to the present — *The Good New Stuff*. I could hardly pass up the chance to revisit beloved classics and to discover some recent examples which I might have missed. Dozois's trusted guidance might be just the thing to show me that adventure fiction "in the grand tradition" is alive and well in our time.

The stories in *The Good Old Stuff*, with few exceptions, hold up very well to reading (or rereading) decades after they were first written. James H. Schmitz's "The Second Night of Summer," H. Beam Piper's "Gunpowder God," Fritz Leiber's "Moon Duel" — they've each got that gripping narrative tension which, more than any other single quality, defines adventure fiction. Jack Vance's "The New Prime," C. M. Kornbluth's "That Share of Glory," Cordwainer Smith's "Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons" — they all share the intergalactic scope and exotic scenery which Dozois identifies as a vital characteristic of sf adventures in particular. Dozois hasn't chosen the best-known stories by most of these authors — in many cases he hasn't even chosen their best stories, period — but in some ways his preference for less-familiar stories serves to back up his point: The adventure fiction from the old pulps isn't memorable only for its very best examples, but even for some of its second-string material. Sure, there's a lot in those thousands of yellowing pages that's not worth looking at again, but surely Leigh Brackett's "The Last Days of Shandrakar"

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should be remembered along with her more famous Eric John Stark stories.

Not every story here holds up as well as every other, though, and I can't say I'm convinced when Dozois claims that he would buy every one of these stories today if it came across his desk. Some of the concepts and phrases in A. E. van Vogt's "The Rull" are rather creaky (which is hardly a surprise), and the futurific corruptions of place names in Poul Anderson's "The Sky People" recall the awkward gestures of *Star Trek* ("from Awaii to his own N'Zealann and west to Mlaya"). More significantly, as Dozois himself notes, some of these stories display the "frothingly xenophobic" attitudes prevalent at the time — could a story like Murray Leinster's "Exploration Team," in which human colonizers gleefully set out to exterminate the troublesome local fauna, really be published today? I'd hope not. (At the very least, the issues of conservation and ecological instability would have to be raised in such a story these days, but they aren't in Leinster's.)

Ursula K. Le Guin isn't a name one would generally associate with adventure fiction, and "Semley's Necklace," the story that represents her in *The Good Old Stuff*, is by no means her best work, but Le Guin's presence in this book, as well as that of Brian W. Aldiss, Roger Zelazny, and James Tiptree, Jr., backs up another of Dozois's points: sf adventure was never the province only of minor writers, but has frequently drawn the attention of some of sf's most talented. What Dozois doesn't say, but which his selections make clear, is that the lasting enjoyability of the stories in *The Good Old Stuff* derives in large part from the fact that their authors were serious writers — not hacks, and not slumming, but drawn by the audacious sweep and thrill of adventure stories to try their own hands at them. While Le Guin and Zelazny and the other authors here frequently produced deeper and more complex stories, their adventure pieces benefit tremendously from the sheer intelligence and mastery of craft that they brought to the game. Every one of these stories, from van Vogt's "The Rull" through Anderson's "The Sky People" and Tiptree's "Mother in the Sky with Diamonds," embodies some idea, some philosophy, some way of seeing the world, which lends the action a crucial measure of additional weight. These aren't cookie-cutter stories just going

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through the motions to fill up space and meet a certain word-count; there's genuine passion, thought, and interest on display, and that's the element which, above all, makes a story worth reading and rereading.

So far, so good. Things change with *The Good New Stuff*. It's not that these stories are bad — most of them are quite good — but they could hardly seem more different from the "old" stuff if they were written in Esperanto. From George R. R. Martin's "The Way of Cross and Dragon" and Maureen F. McHugh's "The Missionary's Child" to Michael Swanwick's "The Blind Minotaur" and Tony Daniel's "A Dry, Quiet War," these stories emphasize the cerebral over the physical; when there's "action" at all, the heroes are reluctant and disenchanted; hardly any of these pieces feature the headlong pacing that's the hallmark of *The Good Old Stuff*.

More than anything else, though, what's missing from these more recent stories is the innocence and naive enthusiasm of the old days. From van Vogt through Zelazny, all the stories in Dozois's previous volume share a common ignorance of the complicated consequences of real life; their verve and energy depend upon a faith in human predominance, enemies without virtue, simple answers to simple questions. Leinster's "Exploration Team" may illustrate this best, with its reckless extermination of alien wildlife, but even the *Good Old* stories with the most contemporary feel — such as James H. Schmitz's "The Second Day of Summer" — present scenarios without major doubts or uncertainties. The *New Stuff*, on the other hand, shares a sober and reflective tone, and centers itself on the very problems which the *Old Stuff* largely ignored. Tony Daniel's galactic soldiers terrorize civilians for pleasure; McHugh's backwater planet suffers the dislocations of colonialism from its contact with the higher-tech Cousins; in "Guest of Honor," Robert Reed's effete immortals deceive and kill their innocent, adventurous clones in order to absorb their memories. These stories often read like anti-adventures, deconstructions or critiques of the "old stuff" — not necessarily to denounce it, but to accommodate the adventure story to a modern sensibility.

The lead story in *The Good New Stuff* may exemplify the point. "Goodbye, Robinson Crusoe" by John Varley (note the title) shows

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us a centenarian man who has had himself infantilized, his memories suppressed and his body made prepubescent, in order to escape the stresses of his high-powered job. Piri spends his days in a recreated tropical paradise, frolicking with tamed sharks and having make-believe adventures with the Reef Pirates. But events in the outside world have taken a turn, and Piri's vacation has to be cut short; a psychiatrist comes in to rush Piri's reintegration as an adult. As he says his last goodbye to his paradise, Piri thinks, "*Now I'm a grownup, and must go off to war.*" Childhood fancies have no place in the complicated adult world of interplanetary statecraft. "No place for Robinson Crusoe."

I don't think it's an accident that the period which intervenes between the latest story in *The Good Old Stuff* and the earliest story in *The Good New Stuff* corresponds to the collapse of the war in Vietnam and the Watergate crisis. Those events — along with the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, an oil crisis, and a long recession — brought an end to the devil-may-care attitudes of the post-War decades. No serious writer after that time can ignore the horrors and costs of war, the need for tolerance among differing peoples (or species), the dangers of ecological imbalance. Thus these stories may draw on the "grand tradition" for their exotic settings and basic scenarios, but they cannot use that material in the same way. Even the least introspective stories here — Janet Kagan's "The Return of the Kangaroo Rex," G. David Nordley's "Poles Apart" — show the deep and unavoidable impact of today's cultural context: Kagan's story focuses on the perils of upsetting fragile ecosystems, and Nordley's concentrates on the noble but difficult challenge of maintaining inter-species harmony.

While some may mourn the passing of the old adventure ethos, it's unrealistic to expect anything else. Fiction, like all other cultural artifacts, emerges from its particular milieu with a distinct flavor and texture — how could it not? Writers don't float free above the social surf of their times — they're right there in the froth, along with their readers. The "good old stuff" was born in the unique historical environment of the post-War United States, and it shows. The "good new stuff" is growing in the soil of our confused, disillusioned post-Cold War world. They are bound to be different.

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Which isn't to say that contemporary writers can't produce stories that keep the reader up all night, desperate to find out what happens, while paying the necessary attention to the complexities of today's sensibilities. Vernor Vinge's story in *The Good New Stuff*, "The Blabber," is one of the few in the volume to offer the action and pacing of the "old stuff" while maintaining a contemporary emotional tone. Vinge's latest novel, *A Deepness in the Sky* (a prequel to *A Fire Upon the Deep*), performs the same trick at considerably longer length.

From the first line he plunges us headlong into a scenario with all the scope in time and space of a Cordwainer Smith story: "The manhunt extended across more than one hundred light-years and eight centuries." That's just the prologue; the story proper takes us to a very strange star system, whose sun stays "on" for only 35 years out of every 250; the rest of the time it's "off," cooled down and dim as a brown dwarf. During those dark years, the one planet of the OnOff system undergoes a harsh change of season, during which even its atmosphere freezes into snow. All the creatures of the planet have had to adapt to these long cold times with various forms of hibernation — including the intelligent arachnoid Spiders, who have managed nevertheless to build up a civilization of early-twentieth-century-level technology.

Two fleets come to the OnOff system at the same time. One are the Qeng Ho, representatives of a far-flung trading empire; the other call themselves "Emergents," and can scarcely disguise their totalitarian impulses toward conquest. Despite Qeng Ho precautions, the Emergents spring an ambush while the two parties are conducting joint reconnaissance of the planet, but the fighting cripples both sides so badly that neither can mount a return voyage until the Spiders have advanced enough to help rebuild their ships. Meanwhile, the Spiders are well on their way, even without the clandestine help of their alien visitors. Sherkaner Underhill, a kind of Spider Thomas Edison, sparks a tremendous burst of development when he suggests that Spiderkind can stay active and awake during the frozen Dark, with enough power — and proceeds to invent all the gadgets necessary to make it work.

That's just the beginning, and that's about all I'm going to say. Everything gets more complicated and taut as the trajectories of the two civilizations — starfarers and

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Spiders — move toward contact, or collision. What's most interesting about *A Deepness in the Sky* in this context — apart from Vinge's playful inventiveness and the pacing that keeps one on seat-edge — is how Vinge's scenario neatly encapsulates the dichotomy in sf made clear in Dozois's anthologies. The complicated world of the Qeng Ho and the Emergents — with its tragedies and intrigue, its excruciating moral dilemmas, its utter lack of easy answers — reflects the contemporary shape of the sf adventure story. But within that context, through the Spiders, Vinge gives us a tale straight out of the "grand tradition" — the Spiders's plucky bootstrapping from primitive radio to nuclear power and space travel recalls any number of forward-thinking, can-do, gung-ho tales of the fifties. Alone, the Spiders' story would be too cute and contrived to countenance, but nested as it is in the context of a more complex and mature vision of a space-faring future, it becomes both guiltlessly enjoyable and subtly thought-provoking. In it we watch the shape of our recent history repeated, and whenever the thought nags that the Spiders are too anthropomorphic — not alien enough — Vinge reminds us that the narrative of the Spiders is the product of a human translator grasping to convey the essence of the tale through images a human mind would find comprehensible.

In the work of Vinge and others the "grand tradition" of sf adventure lives on — but in a starkly modified form. We cannot bring back the mentality of the fifties (even if we'd wish to do so), and we cannot expect today's sf to recreate the sf of the post-War period. Today's sf speaks, as it should, in today's idiom. Its stories are today's stories. It could hardly be otherwise.

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At this writing, Jerry Oltion is in Hawaii researching the novel-length expansion of "Abandon in Place," a story of his you might recall from a couple of years ago. We should all be so lucky as to face such difficult research assignments. Or perhaps our luck should land us on a planet such as the one described herein—Lady Luck wears many faces.

Biosphere

By Jerry Oltion

THE AUTOPILOT BROUGHT the lander in fast, braking hard over the tiny clearing in the forest and setting down before the fusion flame could set the trees on fire. That didn't seem like a big danger — it was raining like a waterfall out there — but Darran figured the first person to visit a planet that might be inhabited should be careful not to cause any more damage than necessary.

The computer said, "Contact," and a moment later the automatic levelers adjusted the floor angle. Darran shut off the drive and spoke into his pressure suit mike.

"I'm down. View out the port is very bright and green. The glass is too ripply with rain water to see much detail, but tell Boglietti his planet's chartreuse."

Richard Boglietti had discovered the planet while the *Pioneer* was still half a light-year out from Altair, but he wasn't the explorer type. He was an astronomer; the overall system held more interest for him than did the planet itself. The starship's two other crewmembers were excited

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enough, but they were both in the infirmary with a virus they'd gotten from one of the passengers coming out of hibernation, and none of the sleepers would be ready for duty for over a week. It fell to Darran, who had been born twenty-two years ago en route from the Sirius colony and had never before set foot on anything not manmade, to speak the first words from the surface. And to find out why there were no cities or obvious signs of habitation despite a constant low-level microwave hum that came from practically everywhere.

He tried not think too much about the responsibility he'd been given. It would probably come to nothing anyway. Nobody had answered their radio signals; the microwaves probably came from a natural source.

He closed his suit visor. "I'm buttoning up to go out — "

"Warning," said the computer. "External cooling air pumps one and two have failed."

Darran looked to the control panel for confirmation, saw two red lights blinking there. Then another one. He looked at the label just as the computer spoke again. "Main engine fuel line failure."

Was he under attack? But the external sensors registered no motion outside. Besides, the air pumps and fuel line were inside the hull; they would be impossible to hit without taking half a dozen other subsystems with them. It had to be a spontaneous failure, even though the lander had worked fine all the way down through the thick atmosphere.

But that was just the beginning. A wave of warning lights swept across the board, starting in the drive section and working steadily across the attitude control jets and external sensors, then blinking on in the environmental section and power supply. The computer's alarm voice couldn't keep up with it.

"Computer, shut up," Darran told it. "I've got a cascade failure of some sort," he said for the benefit of the people in orbit. He was proud of how calm he sounded. It had to be an instrumentation problem; that many separate systems couldn't fail at once.

Then he felt a thump from beneath the deck and heard the screech of metal giving way under too much stress, and he decided maybe they could.

The computer broke silence to say, "Situation critical. Eject now," but he was already shouting, "Eject, eject!" If the control board could be believed, the fuel tank had just ruptured.

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He felt a hard jolt, and the instruments went dead. Either the tank had blown and he would be dead in a millisecond or two himself, or...

Heavy acceleration shoved him back in his seat. Motion outside the viewport drew his attention from the dark controls. He was flying horizontally across the forest, maybe a hundred feet above the treetops. Fast. The computer had fired the eject rocket, then immediately turned it sideways to give him the best chance of escaping the explosion.

A ragged, cylindrical chunk of tree shot past, and a second later the control cabin shook as the blast caught up with him. He saw sky, then trees, then sky again, and he felt his harness straps reel him in tight to the seat.

He hit the forest backwards. It felt like the first tree snapped off, and the second one flexed, bouncing him back the way he'd come. The viewport offered little clue: he saw branches slap the glass — a particularly big one put a starfish crack in it — and then he felt a hard jolt forward and everything went dark. The control cabin had plowed face-first into the ground.

"I'm alive," he said, amazed. He didn't even hurt anywhere. His heart was pounding like crazy, but he had survived without a scratch.

Nobody responded.

"Hello up there," he said again. "Darran to *Pioneer*. Come in, *Pioneer*."

The external antenna had no doubt been scraped away in the crash, and his suit radio apparently wasn't strong enough to punch through the hull and a hundred miles of soggy air on its own. He would have to go outside and try it.

"Computer?" he said.

Silence.

"Oh, great." He peered closely at the control panel, looking for the reset button. A few warning lights still burned there, but they didn't provide enough illumination to see by. The emergency cabin lights didn't respond to his command either, so he flipped on his suit's headlamp. Its beam looked eerily blue after all that green a moment ago.

There was the reset button, up in the corner where he wouldn't hit it by accident. He pushed it, waited a second, then said "Computer?"

Still nothing.

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Definitely time to try calling for help from outside.

The cabin was surprisingly undamaged. Darran took a couple deep breaths and unbuckled, then climbed up on the seat so he could reach the airlock. The planet's low gravity helped some with that; he was able to pull himself up with just his arms. The inner door slid smoothly into the wall when he punched the cycle button; he hit the emergency stop when it was two-thirds of the way open so he'd have a ledge to stand on, then climbed in and took one of the laser pistols from its clip in the airlock. He didn't really think he had been attacked, but it reassured him to hold the laser anyway.

Nothing happened when he pushed the button to open the outer door. He wasn't surprised; there was a big dent where the door had met with a tree. He opened the access panel beside it, broke the security strip over the red T-handle, and yanked that sideways. The explosive bolts went off with a bang and the hatch tumbled away to land with a splat on the wet ground. Bright green light flooded the interior of the cabin again, along with a shower of rainwater.

"Hello *Pioneer*," he said again, standing on the partly closed inner door and sticking his head cautiously outside. If natives *had* attacked him, they could be out there now, waiting to finish him off. He held his pistol ready, but he knew he wouldn't have a chance against more than one or two opponents. He couldn't really believe he'd been fired on anyway, not that quickly. Anything intelligent enough to invent a weapon would be curious enough to see who he was before they shot at him, wouldn't they?

Nothing moved. He switched off his headlamp. He could hear, muffled somewhat by his pressure suit helmet, the hiss of rain beating against the skin of the lander. And against his helmet. He felt a thrill run up his spine, a surge of excitement that had nothing to do with the crash. He was down on a planet, getting rained on by water that had never been through a spray nozzle.

Well, maybe some of it had. Darran inched his head upward and peered all the way around in a circle. Was anyone watching him? The idea made him shiver again. He had hoped to meet aliens, but not under these circumstances. "Come in, *Pioneer*," he said. "Caitlin? Rich? Do you read?"

Nothing. He was beginning to realize that he could be in serious

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trouble here. He was used to life on the ship, where help was only a deck or two away even in the most serious of problems, but here he was hundreds of miles from home at its closest approach. They had another shuttle on board, and the big cargo lander, but if the crew thought he was dead they wouldn't send either down until they knew what had killed him. He might have to spend the night in the truncated remains of the shuttle, living in his pressure suit and hoping his air purifier didn't give out.

He looked back to where the engine had been. The control cabin ended in a smooth line even with the inside deck; everything but a set of emergency batteries and his air tank had gone with the drive section.

Rain poured in through the hatch at his feet and dripped onto the control panel. It didn't matter; there was nothing left to control, but he might be spending quite a bit of time in there waiting for rescue. He climbed out, his back itching at the thought that someone — something — might have him in its sights, and pushed the button that closed the inner door.

From atop the hull he looked out at the forest, the near trees towering over him, anything farther than a few dozen feet half hidden in the downpour. Even so, there was a lot of biology out there — way more than he was used to on the ship, even in the garden. The trees rose up tall and straight, about ten or twenty feet apart and without branches for the first thirty feet or so, then they sprouted a four-foot diameter ring that would have been at home under the cap of a giant mushroom, and above that they had more conventional branches. He couldn't tell if they were needled or leafed or something else, not with the rain streaking his faceplate. The forest canopy didn't seem to slow the downpour much.

Down below the trees, bushes and flowers and vines and a thousand other plants competed for space on the ground. Everything was green, even the flowers, as if he had a green filter on his helmet; and the sky glowed bright even though the cloud deck was about forty thousand feet thick. He was glad for that much shade; he had in fact picked this landing site rather than a clear spot because of it, so he wouldn't fry in direct sunlight. Altair was nine times brighter than the Sun; even though Boglietti's Planet circled it a lot farther out than Earth circled Sol, it was still too hot and bright for human comfort out in the open.

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Well, Darran was here to explore. His heart pounded and a small voice in the back of his mind cried, "Stranded, stranded!" but if he couldn't contact the ship he'd better have a look around to see what he could do to help himself. He walked along the curved hull until it became too steep to stand on, then turned and began to climb carefully to the ground. It would be easy enough to climb back up; gravity was only about two-thirds that on the ship, and most of the handgrips and tiedowns had survived the trip through the trees.

Or so he thought. The second one he put his weight on gave way under his boot, and he tumbled to the ground. Fortunately he landed on his butt, but the suit didn't like it even so. The alarm voice said, "Suit integrity breached. Overpressurizing to avoid atmospheric intrusion."

"Cancel that," he said. His ears popped, then popped again. The crew had already determined by spectroscopic analysis from orbit that the air was breathable; there was no sense pouring all his oxygen through a suit leak just to delay the inevitable. He reached up to his helmet and lifted the faceplate, tensing at the idea of taking his first breath of an alien atmosphere.

The faceplate came off in his hands.

He stood there, smelling the rich, fragrant air and listening to the suddenly louder hiss of rain while he stared blankly at the shallow bowl of clear plastic which had, only half an hour ago in orbit, kept him protected from vacuum when he transferred over from the *Pioneer* to the lander. And which had done the same during countless other EVAs throughout his life on board the starship.

He looked at it more closely. Nothing wrong with it that he could see. He tilted his head back as far as he could inside his helmet and looked at the channel the faceplate was supposed to slide in. There was the trouble. The metal track that held the silicon rubber seal had bent outward, as if under incredible pressure.

Which was ridiculous, of course. That kind of pressure would have crushed his head first. He reached up and tugged on the frame, and the problem immediately became obvious. The metal track stretched and came away in his hands like warm modeling plastic.

He tugged at the headlamp and it did the same. Its batteries flashed in a loud spark as they shorted out.

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Something was eating his pressure suit.

His laser pistol sizzled. He instinctively flung it away, as if it had transformed into a huge bug. It hit the ground and flashed brilliant blue when its power pack discharged.

In blind panic he scrambled back up the side of the lander, but the handholds pulled loose and he wound up on his back again. He tried kicking holes directly in the softened hull for his feet and punching handholds to grab, but he made it no farther than before. The whole skin of the lander was sloughing away. As were the boots and gloves of his pressure suit.

This was what had happened to the air pumps. They had been sucking in cooling air all the way down from orbit. Darran was lucky he'd had time to land before they dissolved.

"Help!" he shouted, hoping his suit radio might somehow reach the ship. "I'm falling apart down here! It's like acid, or — hell, I don't know what it is, but it's eating everything!"

No response from the ship, but he heard a groan from the shuttle and looked up at the curved wall, then took a few nervous steps backward. It was hard to walk on the springy, uneven ground. Water and little plants squished between his toes, and harder plants poked at the soles of his feet through the deteriorating boots. The soft stuff felt disgusting, and the sharp stuff scared him silly. He expected his skin to go the same way as his pressure suit any moment now, starting with whatever spot got the first scratch.

The lander slumped like a melting sugar cube. The rounded wall buckled, and with a wet slurp like the sound of a ripe melon being ripped apart the walls fell away, exposing the control panel and pilot's chair. Darran watched as they dissolved, too, and waited with mounting terror for his body to do the same.

The pressure suit shredded away like wet tissue paper, all but the faceplate, which he clutched in his hand while his clothing started to disintegrate, but his body remained unaffected. Long after the p-suit and his clothes were gone and the lander had become an unrecognizable lump of decayed metal, he stood there, alone and naked on an alien world.

The rain felt like a hot shower against his bare shoulders. On board the ship he had loved the sensation. Sometimes he would shower until his

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skin wrinkled like a raisin's, luxuriating in the endless supply of recycled engine cooling water. The supply here seemed equally endless, but far less comforting.

At least it was warm. He laughed when he realized that. At least it was warm. Count your blessings, his mother had always told him; well, there was one.

His laughter quickly edged over toward hysteria. He fought it down and tried to think. Everything else had dissolved, but he hadn't. Nor had his faceplate. And now that he looked closely at the molten puddle of silvery metal that had been his lander, he saw a few other pieces of plastic that had survived.

He wondered how long that would last. The metal was still seething with activity. Not quite boiling, but there was plenty of reaction going on there. What sort of reaction? That was the question.

Acids ate metals, didn't they? Could there be some kind of acid in the rain?

He had a hard time believing it. Sure acids ate metals, but the hull was mostly titanium and it had disappeared like *that*. Any kind of acid that corrosive would have eaten him as well, wouldn't it?

He shuddered again. Don't think about that, he told himself. Don't even begin to think about that. You're not dissolving.

Maybe there could be some kind of acid that ate metal but not flesh. This was an alien world, after all. It could have come up with organic compounds unheard of anywhere else, including acids. Or microbes, for that matter. Maybe it was something alive that liked metal but not people. Or any organic molecule of sufficient complexity. That would explain why some of the plastic parts hadn't dissolved.

He bent down and ripped up a handful of green moss from between his feet. At least it looked like moss. Dark green. It felt squishy and a little bit coarse, as if its individual cells were larger and stiffer but joined more loosely to one another than Terran cells. It smelled musty, alive. Maybe a little like the chlorella algae in the air tanks. If he'd been on board the *Pioneer* he could have analyzed its chemical makeup in a few minutes, even mapped its DNA if that's what it used for genetic coding, but here he had no tools at all. It looked like a grainy plant; that was all he could say about it.

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He looked up again. Still no sign of anyone out there. He almost wished there would be, but it didn't seem as likely now.

He wondered if anyone was warming up the other lander yet. Despite his fervent wish for rescue, he hoped they wouldn't. Whatever got him would almost undoubtedly get them, too. Even if they were able to land and take off again without dissolving, they'd never make it all the way back into orbit before the acid — or whatever it was — ate into something critical and the drive blew them all over the sky.

He had to warn them. But how? He had no radio, no weapon to signal with, no way to make a fire — nothing except the curved plastic faceplate from his spacesuit. He couldn't even lay out a message for them to read through the clouds with hi-definition radar, because there was nothing to lay it out with and no clearing to lay it out in.

Or was there? The one speck of non-green color in the entire forest, besides the pool of metal slowly draining into the mud at his feet, was the bluish-white trunk of the treetop the control section of the lander had broken on its way down. It lay on the ground almost at the edge of vision between a couple of still-standing trunks. Without its branches it would make a pretty good log. A mile or so back through the trees there was undoubtedly a big supply of similar logs, probably already broken into convenient pieces, and a nice big clearing to arrange them in.

If he could ever find it in this dense forest. At that thought the little voice in the back of his mind screamed, "You're lost!" but he took a deep breath and looked up at the trees, trying to spot the still-standing half of the broken one. He had to shield his eyes from the rain so he could see, but there it was beyond the melted lander, snapped off just above its mushroom ring. From the angle between that and the piece on the ground, it looked like the original landing site had to be off to the left.

Darran looked at the silvery mudhole that had been the top half of his lander. Should he fish out any of the surviving plastic pieces? He didn't want to abandon anything he might need later, but he didn't know how he could carry more than a handful of stuff, and he couldn't bring himself to reach into the quivering mass of decomposition anyway.

With one last backward glance to fix the location in his mind in case he needed to return, Darran set off through the trees. He stepped gingerly at first, feeling awkward and more vulnerable than he'd ever felt in his life.

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He was squeamishly aware of every plant he crushed and of the muck that oozed around his feet, but he soon realized he couldn't watch his footing and keep his bearings at the same time. He resolutely kept his gaze straight ahead, picking a shadowy trunk in the rain and walking toward it, then picking another one in the same direction and walking to that, only looking down when he felt something particularly disgusting underfoot.

He felt like throwing up. He wondered if that was from fear or revulsion. Or whatever had happened to the lander might finally be happening to him, but he forced that thought away again. If that was the case he couldn't do anything about it.

Nor, he realized, could he do much about fear or revulsion. Even now, fifteen minutes or so after the crash, his heart still pounded loud enough to hear over the rain. And all the living...stuff everywhere spooked him just as badly as being stranded. Twenty-two years on board a starship, with its metal corridors and potted plants, hadn't prepared him for the *squishiness* of life on a planet.

And if he never took another shower again in his life, it would be too soon.

A piercing screech from off in the forest made him forget about the rain. That had been an animal. A big one, by the sound of it. He leaped instinctively for the closest tree and scraped his hands and knees as he tried to scramble up it, but he paused about six feet off the ground. Hiding in a tree wouldn't warn the ship. He had to get to the clearing. He dropped back to the springy moss and forced himself to keep walking, trying to look everywhere at once and wondering what he would do if he saw whatever had made the noise.

One worry proved unfounded, at least: there was no way he could miss the site of the explosion. Every hundred yards or so he came across debris from it, and a little examination of the skid marks in the ground invariably showed him the direction it had come from. He paused long enough at the first log to wrench free a branch, twisting it around and around until the tough fibers joining it to the trunk suddenly softened and broke free; then he busted off the other end the same way and pulled off the twigs. They ended in two-foot-long triangular leaves, which fluttered loosely on flimsy stems attached to the narrowest point.

When he was done he had a six-foot club. It lent him a degree of

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confidence that was probably unwarranted, since he'd never even swung a club before, but it felt good to know that he was — in theory at least — armed.

The club could even double as a rough spear if he could just figure out how to sharpen it. A rock would do, but there were none to be seen. Everything was covered with a thick mat of moss or bushes. There weren't even any rocks among the ejecta from the explosion. That seemed a bit strange. Surely a fuel tank explosion would have dug down to bedrock. Positron plasma was as powerful as fuel got; even though there wasn't that much of it in the lander's tank there was enough to scoop out a good-sized crater.

When he arrived at the site he saw that he was at least partly right. The explosion had flattened trees for a quarter mile around, and in the middle of them all, the center of the bull's-eye, was a deep lake. But no rock. The sides of the crater were a black, viscous goo. He bent down for a close look and saw that it was flowing like thick grease, slowly filling in the depression. It looked alive, buzzing with activity just like the remains of the control cabin. Not only that, but this was purposeful activity, as if it knew the ground had been damaged and was moving in to repair the wound.

Darran backed away from the crater. If his hair hadn't been so soggy it would have been standing on end. The *ground* was alive? There was definitely too much biology here. He wanted back on board the *Pioneer*, back to clean, carpeted decks and flat metal walls.

There was no sign of the lander, probably wouldn't have been even without whatever it was that ate non-living things. Not after that explosion. Darran looked around for any creatures capable of making the noise he'd heard earlier, but he saw nothing larger than an insect, and precious few of those. Once he confirmed that he was alone he set his club and the faceplate down and walked over to a piece of tree about the diameter of his leg and maybe twenty feet long, grabbed it by a stub of a branch, and dragged it close to the crater. The light gravity made it just possible if he leaned into it. Then he went back for another and set it at an angle next to the first one. And so on for an hour or longer, pausing to rest only after he'd spelled out "DON'T LAND" in block letters. He was especially proud of the apostrophe, even though that was the easiest part.

The work made him thirsty, so he stopped long enough to drink the

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water that had accumulated in his p-suit faceplate. He wondered what sort of alien microbes were in it, but he'd already breathed enough to kill him if they were going to. It tasted just like ship's water, even down to the slightly metallic flavor that he had always assumed was from the recycler. Maybe that was just the way water tasted, because there certainly couldn't be any metal here.

He was growing hungry, too, but he would have to get a lot hungrier before he tried eating any of the native plant life.

He went back to work with more logs, spelling out "METAL MELTS." He used smaller pieces for that, figuring the people on the *Pioneer* could use higher-resolution radar once they saw that he was trying to spell something. Once he knew for sure he had their attention he could probably just use hand signals.

Or maybe not. Radar would pass right through him. He spent a bad moment wondering if it would pick up a tree, but then he remembered they had used it to find the clearing he'd originally landed in. That and infra-red.

So he could assume they had seen his message. That meant the other lander was safe, but he was still no closer to rescue. Until they found out what was responsible for this mess in the first place, they couldn't send anyone to get him.

He sat down on the "D" in "DON'T LAND," its crinkly surface pressing into his bare skin. It felt odd; slippery. He pushed into it with a finger and penetrated up to the second knuckle before he hit hard wood. It had been solid when he laid it down. The disintegration process was already at work on it, then. Now that the tree was dead, it was fair game. But it apparently took longer for individual cells to die, so the log had lasted most of the day.

With that thought, Darran realized that the sky was growing darker. Boglietti's world, like everything in the Altair system, had a lot of angular momentum, which meant a short day.

He'd done all he could anyway. It was time to find shelter for the night. Anything that would get him out of this damnable rain, and protect him from predators.

He retrieved his club and the faceplate from where he'd laid them down, but the club snapped in two under its own weight. Useless now. He

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was back to being naked and defenseless again, unless he could somehow use the faceplate as a weapon. Or he supposed he could rip off another branch every half hour or so, but that would mean climbing a tree, now that all the downed timber was decomposing.

It was getting dark fast. The foliage went from electric green to just plain green, then edged toward black. Darran made a quick foray into the woods and found it even darker in there. He would never find shelter in the few minutes of light left. He had only one real option, the same one his evolutionary forebears had used. He jumped up and wrapped his arms around the trunk of a tree at the edge of the blast zone. He grappled with the rough bark for a second, found a knob he could hold onto, and pulled his legs up until his toes found purchase as well. He looked overhead for another handhold, saw nothing at first, but when he squinted against the rain he saw a zigzag ladder of them leading upward. Thanking providence for small favors, he inched his way up until his head pressed against the ring just below the foliage. He paused under the overhang, savoring the respite from the endless rain, but he knew he would fall the moment he relaxed so he reached up with one hand until he got a firm hold on the lip of the ring, then swung himself out and scrambled over the edge.

The top surface was hard and flat, and maybe four feet in diameter. The canopy of leaves diverted some of the rain, at least, and the shelf would be big enough to lie down on if he curled around the tree trunk. If he wrapped his arms around his knees he might not even fall off in his sleep, assuming he got any.

The sky grew darker until the forest became indistinct, then at some point Darran realized he couldn't see his hands in front of his face anymore. He snuggled up against the tree on his left side and rested his head on his arm, covering his right ear with the faceplate to keep the water off. Through the hiss of rain he heard animals calling to one another out in the forest, and occasionally closer by. Something creaked and groaned out in the clearing, but it was impossible to say what it was. Each new noise sent his pulse skyrocketing until he could breathe deeply and force himself to calm down. It was nothing like this on a starship. There he knew what every sound was; here everything was a surprise. He waited for the shriek of something getting caught and messily devoured, but it never came.

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The rain grew colder as the night wore on. After an hour or so of shivering, Darran stood up, bracing himself against the tree trunk, and reached overhead until he felt leaves, then pulled off as many as he could. He piled them in a nest on his platform and snuggled back down into them, pulling them over his bare skin and tucking them around his arms and legs as best he could. He set the faceplate over his eyes this time and settled back down.

It felt a little better. The rain didn't hit as hard, and it wasn't as cold. Darran could feel motion all along his body — rain trickling through the leaves, maybe even bugs crawling across his skin. He felt what was probably the leaves themselves decomposing and sloughing away, and revulsion nearly made him fling everything off, but the warmth and relative shelter was just barely worth it.

HE WOKE TO BRIGHT, chartreuse light again. The sky was as cloudy as ever, and the rain still fell like a shower on full blast. It didn't cheer him at all to know that other parts of the planet were warm and dry.

Then it registered: so was he. He sat bolt upright, and nearly pitched off his narrow platform. He would have if it hadn't sprouted a railing sometime in the night. But that only drew his attention for a second, because he was wearing an even bigger mystery: his spacesuit had come back.

Darran unsealed the faceplate and slid it upward, smelled the planet's thick aroma, then closed it again and breathed until the suit's recycler removed the odors.

It actually worked. Darran had no idea where the suit had come from. He had seen it disintegrate right off his body. He looked over the edge of his platform to see if there might be someone from the *Pioneer* — or maybe a crowd of aliens — below, and nearly fell off again when he looked out into the clearing.

It wasn't there anymore. All the trees had grown back in the night, or other trees had moved in. Or maybe his own tree had uprooted itself and walked away, carrying him with it. Whatever, from his perch about thirty feet up he could see nothing but more treetops in every direction.

He had to sit down. This was all too much. His vision grew swirly

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until he tucked his head between his knees and breathed deeply for a few seconds. He concentrated on the rubbery surface of the platform on which he sat. Just one tiny piece of this immense planet; that was all he could cope with at the moment.

It looked slightly grainy, as if it were covered with sand. The moss he'd examined yesterday had looked like that, too. And so did his new pressure suit. He reached out with his gloved fingers and scraped at the platform. It didn't yield at first, but after a moment it did, allowing him to draw deep grooves in its surface. The material he dislodged piled up just like sand. When he nudged it, it spread out like sand, too.

Had he broken the cellular bonds? The tree couldn't stand if it was that fragile. Besides, it had been tough as nails for a second before it gave way. And in the next few seconds the gritty material solidified again. The parallel grooves he'd drawn with his fingers froze into place, and the surface became just as hard as before.

He dug at it again, making more grooves alongside the first ones. He scraped his fingers through it once more, trying to make some kind of sense of what he was seeing. How could it do that?

Suddenly a shiver went all through the platform, and the lines he had drawn with his fingers shifted. They moved into regular rows and extended themselves into concentric arcs, rippling all the way around the tree trunk to form circles.

Darran scrambled to his feet in blind panic. His boots skidded, but the rough surface stopped them before he could lose his balance.

"Traction grating," he said. "It turned into traction grating." For that was exactly what it had become. He recognized it from countless corridors and access tunnels on the *Pioneer*. Not the same pattern, but definitely the same idea.

"All right, what's going on here?" he asked aloud. He didn't normally talk to himself, but he needed the human voice even if it was his own. "I got a new spacesuit, the forest came back, the platform grew a railing, and now it made traction grating. This can't be a natural process, no matter how alien this place is."

Which meant it was somehow artificial. He reached out to the tree and pinched the bark in his gloved hand; after a second of resistance it softened and he tore a fist-sized chunk of it loose. He looked closely at it:

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green, grainy, and malleable, like everything else he'd seen on the planet. He squished it in his hands, rolled it out into a long cylinder, and looped it around to make a donut. After a second it morphed into a smooth ring and solidified.

"Kid's toy? Paperweight?" he asked. He squeezed it into a half dozen other shapes, and each time he paused for more than a few seconds it became something else, all equally unrecognizable. But he was beginning to see a pattern. He molded it back into a ring, slid it over his spacesuit's left wrist, flattened it out, and sure enough, it became a wristwatch. An alien wristwatch, with a glowing readout that showed symbols vaguely resembling Chinese, and rows of buttons along the sides, but it confirmed his suspicion. In a what-the-hell mood, he pushed one of the buttons.

The platform on which he stood shuddered, then glided smoothly to the ground. When he pushed on the railing, it parted for him and he stepped out onto the springy forest floor.

"They solved the power distribution problem," he said in wonder. Humanity's attempts at creating universal nanomachines had run repeatedly into the same barrier: it was impossible to give such tiny machines enough energy to disassemble and reassemble things much faster than a living cell could.

The aliens who lived here had evidently figured out how to do it, and they'd come up with an integrated control system as well. Apparently if you shaped the nanomachines into a rough approximation of what you wanted, they would search for a match within their database of known objects.

And when faced with an object they had never seen before, they would disassemble it to make their own template for next time. Either that or they just ate any raw materials they encountered. Leaving biological objects, and anything that looked sufficiently biological, like the plastic faceplate, alone. Wouldn't do to eat the people they were supposed to serve, after all.

Darran wondered what had finally killed off their masters. Or if maybe they were still around, living quiet lives in the woods and showing no signs of civilization from orbit. Maybe they were watching him after all, wondering whether he was intelligent enough to figure out how to solve his problem.

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That was the question, wasn't it? Well, for the first time since he'd landed on this living nightmare of a planet, Darran thought he had the answer. If he was right, he could get offworld again. He would have to spend time quarantined in a free-floating pressure bubble until they could make sure no nanomachines accompanied him into the *Pioneer*, but he wouldn't mind. As long as it didn't rain in the bubble, he could stay there forever if need be.

But first he had to find the spot where the control cabin had been absorbed....

IT TOOK A FEW hours, since he had no downed trees to lead him back, but he eventually came to a depression in the ground with a few plastic fittings scattered within it. Hose couplings, push buttons, all useless now except for one thing.

He bent down and began scooping moss and ferns into a pile at his feet. He took his time, heaping up a mound as big as he could manage. It morphed into a dome at one point, complete with a padded bench and a table inside, and Darran nearly quit his work to go sit down out of the rain, but he knew he was close now so he kept digging and piling.

After a few more pounds of mass he got something that looked a little like a teepee. Apparently a man piling up things in the rain looked like he needed shelter more than anything else. He kept scooping debris up against it, and eventually it became a simple heap of working mass again.

At last when he felt he had approximated the shape of the lander, he reached in through the yielding surface and placed the plastic parts inside, as close as he could guess to where they belonged.

Then he stood back and watched as the surface writhed, expanded, and solidified into a sleek, narrow-bodied, stubby-winged spaceplane that looked like it was doing about ten percent of lightspeed just standing there.

"No, dammit, I want the lander," he said aloud. He was about to start pushing and prodding again when he realized the flaw in his plan. The nanocreatures didn't know what the whole thing looked like. The engine section had blown up before they could make a template of it.

But they had done the best they could to provide him with what he

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asked for. He took a closer look at the spaceplane, and smiled for the first time since he'd arrived. It did look like it would fly, if he could just figure out the controls.

Fortunately it was already pointed upward. He searched for a hatch, found it between the wings, and popped it open with the recessed handle. The inside of the cockpit was long and narrow with a single wrap-around window overhead; after a moment he realized he was supposed to stand up in it. When he did, and closed the hatch behind him, he discovered that his arms would fit into sleeves that extended into the wings. They weren't designed for humans — the arm holes were about ribcage high — but when he slowly stood up and exerted pressure on the sleeves, the holes moved upward to accommodate him.

There weren't any control buttons. Just pedals under his feet and toggles at the ends of his fingers. It wouldn't take much experimentation to figure out what they did.

Head first into the unknown. He grinned outright at the thought. This didn't scare him nearly as much as all the living stuff just outside. He was used to spaceships.

"Let's do it," he said. He flexed his toes and wiggled his fingers, and with a roar of power loud enough to drown out a whole planetful of rain, the spaceplane leaped into the sky.

He leaned left, flexed an arm, arched his back. The ship mimicked his movements in all three dimensions. He felt like a superhero, like a god, and at that moment he understood where the aliens had all gone. With this kind of freedom, they had gone everywhere.

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Robert Loy lives in South Carolina with his wife and four children. He works as a police officer for the Ports Authority and hints that the job might leave him time to read an occasional book or two. To date he has published fourteen stories in Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, *including stories about childhood demons, superheroes, and the land of Oz. This story is something of a landmark for him, however, since it's the first time he has written about an actual Private Investigator. Naturally, it turns out to be perfect fare for* The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction. *(So what's in a magazine's name anyway?)*

Sing a Song of Sixpence A Bottle Full of Rye

By Robert Loy

If you are not handsome at twenty
If you are not strong at thirty
If you are not rich at forty
If you are not wise at fifty
You never will be.
— Nursery Rhyme

SHE WAS BLONDE. SHE WAS tall. She had smoky-cool green eyes that — although I would have bet all eleven dollars of my life savings it was impossible — were compelling enough to pull my attention away from that plunging-to-paradise neckline of hers.

She was also a princess — *the* Princess — and the next queen of our country if her mother-in-law, Queen Charismatic, ever gets tired of hogging the throne.

"Princess Ella," I said, wishing I had thought to wear that necktie I

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almost bought a couple years ago, "come on in. 'Scuse the mess; I wasn't expecting company."

"Ever?" she asked, delicately handkerchiefing away the knuckle dust she had accumulated when she knocked on my door.

My association with majesty was limited to a disbelieving gape at a royal flush that my oversexed friend George Porgie folded cuz he had a hot date to get to. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to bow or curtsy, kiss her hand or tug my forelock, so I stayed where I was, seated behind my desk. I did stub out my cigarette. But that was more of a safety precaution than etiquette. With the hair spray and the perfume she just exuded flammability.

Not to mention the way she crossed her legs.

"Mister Nimble?" my guest said.

"No," I told her, indicating the broken and dusty but still legible — if you looked at it from the right angle — nameplate on the door. "My name is Jack B. Goode. Private investigator. At your service."

"Hmm, that's strange. Somebody told me your name was Jack B. Nimble."

My face reddened, but I wasn't sure if it was because I was blushing or because I put too much bourbon in my morning coffee again.

"I'm afraid that's just a nickname a gratified girlfriend gifted me with some years ago."

"Well, now I am really confused." Her hand fluttered up and lit softly on her alabaster cheek. "But I shouldn't be, I suppose. You probably have lots of names. Now that I think of it, I could swear another friend told me your name was Jack B. Quick."

I didn't see any reason to explain that this moniker was another nickname from the same gossipy no-longer-gratified girlfriend after we broke up, so I asked the Princess what it was I could do for her.

"I'm worried about my husband," she answered.

"You mean Prince Charming?"

She nodded her head and when she spoke again it was in a slower, more school-teachery voice.

"Well, yes, he's the only husband I have."

"Go on," I told her.

"I think somebody's trying to kill him."

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"What makes you think that?"

"He has a terrible sweet tooth, always insists on a slice of blackberry pie before he goes to bed. Lately somebody has been putting blackbirds in his pie."

"Putting what in his pie?"

"Blackbirds."

"So what? A lot of politicians have to eat crow. Kinda goes with the territory, doesn't it?"

My little joke fluttered over her head and out the window to its death.

"But the Prince is extremely allergic to anything avian. It's already happened two dozen times. Robert Shaftoe, the head of the palace guards, is completely at sea about this; you're our only hope. There was an anonymous letter baked in with the last one threatening dire consequences if he didn't stop doing you know what."

"No, I don't know. What?"

"I don't know. That's what the letter said: You know what."

"Oh, well, that's different." I excavated through three or four strata of desk junk and emerged with a spiral notebook.

"Well," I said, licking the point of my pencil stub, after deciding it wasn't worth risking rabies to dig down deep enough to where there might be a pencil sharpener, "if he's doing you know what, he must be doing it with you know who. So who?"

Princess Ella's cheeks turned even rosier and she raised her voice maybe five or six decibels. I guess this is what princesses do when they're angry.

"Mr. Goode, are you implying that my husband might be committing the sin of adultery?"

"Yes, Yer Highness, that's exactly what I'm suggestin' and I'll need all the usual info — names, addresses, favorite positions. Glossy color eight-by-ten pictures if you can get 'em."

"Why on Earth do you need all of that?'

"I'm lonely," I told her. "Now what can you — "

Now she stood up and tapped her little size double zero foot on the floor. I thought she might be patting a cockroach on the head, but it turns out this is how princesses throw a temper tantrum.

"Sir, you are barking up the wrong dog. It's true that his father the old

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King was something of a merry old soul, loved a party with lots of wine, women and tobacco, but Prince Charming is nothing like that old reprobate Cole."

WELL, I WASN'T going to argue with a princess. Maybe it becomes second nature to try and protect the family name. Maybe she really didn't know her husband had a wandering eye and a body that was willing to follow. After all, not everybody reads the same high-class tabloids I do.

And maybe the Princess was right. Maybe Charming was faithful. Maybe for the first time in the history of mankind "You know what" referred to something asexual.

One way to find out. I dropped by to see my favorite informant, Bill Winkle. Short and gruffer than a billy goat, Winkle runs a newsstand and he really knows his business. And since he is also a dedicated busybody he knows everybody else's as well.

"Hey, Bill," I said.

"Hi, Jack, find ya a Jill yet?"

"Still looking, my friend. I'm thinking she must have found herself one heck of a hiding place."

Winkle scowled. "Fah, by the time you find her you'll be so far over the hill you won't remember what you're supposed to do with her."

"Say, Bill," I said, "you got a little time for me?"

"Sure, Jack, *Time, Newsweek*, whatever you want."

"How about *Playboy*? As in Prince Charming following the philosophy?"

Winkle scowled. "How many times have I told you, don't believe everything you read. This stuff about the Prince's philandering is just a little hard to swallow," he said, straightening up a row of *Reader's Digests*. "I happen to know the Prince likes nothing better than staying home and organizing his collection of clodhoppers."

"So you're saying he's the model husband?"

"No, the Prince has his faults, but he's not the scoundrel some of your less-respectable publications would have you believe."

"So, that's it? No dirt."

"Well, nothing new. Everybody knows he's got that funny thing about

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feet. Whaddayacallit? A fetish. That's how he used to pick all his girlfriends back in his bachelor days; never even looked at their faces, just their dogs. You remember that crazy old woman over in Wellington actually lived in a giant shoe? For a while Charming was dating one of her daughters, even though she was uglier than homemade sin, just so he could hang around that big old brogan building. His brother, Prince Winsome, digs the lower digits too. He had his eye on that same girl — same foot, I should say. For a while there he and Charming were arch enemies."

"What was the name of the girl he was dating?" I asked, thinking I might finally have a lead here.

"I don't know, there was so many of them. And the house is all boarded up now. Turns out the mother was abusing the kids something awful. Terrible sad story.

"Say, wait a second," he interrupted himself. "I do know something about the Prince. Ambassador White took the Prince to dinner one night a month or so ago. I hear she wanted to ask some special favors for that dopey miner coalition she represents. I happen to know that she kept your friend Charming out till way after midnight."

My ears perked up.

"Yeah, where were they?"

"I toldja, they were having dinner. That's all — dinner. The point is that the sleep you get before midnight is the best and they got none that night."

Winkle is a real believer in the early-to-bed philosophy. In fact he's a fanatic about it. It's his whaddayacallit — fetish.

"The real story is about the Princess."

"You got some dirt on her?"

"There used to be a lot of dirt on her. She's a guttersnipe, comes from some bourgeois family out in the sticks. Father dead, stepmother mean as hell, same old story. Charming only fell for her cuz she had those tee-tiny feet he's so crazy about. Course they've since discovered that it's tough to base a relationship on a cute instep. But I'm pretty sure the Prince is still toeing the line. I mean, I really don't think he's got a tootsie on the side. He's not that kind of a heel."

* * *

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I called the palace to see if I could get an appointment to see Prince Charming, but I was told that although he was too busy to see me just yet he would be in touch with me soon to set up an appointment.

At least I assume that's what all that laughing meant.

So the only thing I could think to do was root around Princess Ella's family tree. It was easy to see why she didn't go around bragging about her background. Her family lived in what was probably a nice house once, in a neighborhood that could still have passed for respectable if this house had been in a different one. Their mailbox was down and the yard was filled with junk and trash. I guess they were having a hard time finding help since Ella went to live in the palace.

The woman who answered my knock was gray-headed and starting to stoop, but still with a fire in her eye. I handed her my card and asked if I could come in for a few minutes.

"Jack B. Goode?" she said, studying my card. "I'm sorry, Mr. Goode. We don't do much planting these days, and even if we did I wouldn't be interested in buying any beanstalks."

"Then we'll get along just fine," I told her, as I stepped in the door. "Since I'm not selling any beanstalks."

The house smelled like mildew and stale popcorn. Dirty out-of-date party dresses and shoes were strewn everywhere. So were pizza boxes and microwave dinner trays. The only part of the house I could see that wasn't filthy was the fireplace, and it sparkled.

"Girls, clear off that table, we've got company," my hostess yelled into the dark kitchen. "A gentleman caller."

It took my eyes a few seconds to adjust to the gloom, but when they did I saw two women lost somewhere in their thirties, playing an ironic hand of Old Maid — and arguing — at the kitchen table. Their hair was in curlers, where it looked like it had been for weeks, and their bellies roiled out over the strained waistbands of their moth-eaten sweat pants.

My eyes continued downward, and I made a bet with myself that soon I would find dirty off-brand sneakers, but I lost that wager because what they actually had wrapped around their lower extremities was some sort of system of rags and wooden braces. It was obviously an attempt to emulate our oriental friends and make their feet petite.

But I could have told them it was a painful waste of time. For one thing

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their ankles were already sailing along on size twelve dinghies, and for another if by some weird chance another prince did come to this house looking for a mate, he probably would not be as kinky as Charming.

The news of a gentleman caller did not impress either of these young ladies. There was a bowl of milk that had curdled on the table, and one of the sisters did shove this out of the way so I could sit down, but a tarantula had beaten me to the seat, so I passed.

"You cheated," said the ditchwater brunette one. "That is not the card I meant to draw."

Her sister made an even funnier face than the one God gave her — another bet I would have lost — and said, "Well, it's not my fault if you're clumsy."

"Cheater."

"Lummox."

Mamma cuffed them both in the back of the head.

"Girls, say hello to Mr. Jack B. Goode. Mr. Goode, these are my daughters, Emberita and Sparkimberly."

Neither of them got up, but Emberita rolled her eyes at me and said, "Didn't you kill a giant or something? I know I've heard of you."

"Frame-up job," I told her. "I never killed anybody bigger than a bread box."

"Can I get you something to eat?" Mamma asked me. "We've got some leg of lamb that our neighbor Mary lost — I mean gave us."

I did the rub-your-belly-and-pretend-like-you-just-ate-a-big-meal "No-thanks" number. I'd already learned all I could here without asking a single question. Prince Charming was certainly not having an affair with any of the yetis in this house. And no doubt they could dish up plenty of dirt on Ella if I asked, but how much of it would be fact and how much plain old jealousy would take too long to figure out.

Just for the hell of it I decided to see if I could start a family feud before I left. Everybody's got a fetish. Charming's was feet. I was betting that Mamma's was a clean fireplace.

"I'm not hungry," I said. "But there is a chill in the air. Would you mind if I started a fire?"

Now both girls jumped up.

"I'll make you some coffee — hot coffee," said Sparkimberly.

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Emberita pulled on my arm. "And I'll get you a blanket and a coat. Although I don't know why I should care — it's her turn to clean the fireplace."

"Liar," was her sister's oh-so-clever retort. "It's your turn and you know it."

Mamma grabbed a broom, but I snuck out the back door and didn't see if she swatted her daughters with it or flew off on it to her coven meeting.

BY NOW IT WAS 2:00 in the afternoon, and I thought about spending the remainder of the day whiskey-diving at the Gosling's Mater, and the night wandering around trying to figure out where the heck my house had gone. But then I remembered that Princess Ella was paying me by the job and not by the hour, so I bought a newspaper and took a seat at the Silver Spoon Coffee Shop to plan my next move.

The place had changed. Instead of the usual gossip and clamor, there was musical entertainment, some unseen jazz cat manqué torturing a fiddle somewhere. Worst of all, instead of the redhead I usually flirted with, some greasy-haired guy came over to take my order.

"Good afternoon, sir," he sang. "My name is Tommy Tucker; and I'll be serving you supper. Our special this afternoon is a porridge made from pease meal; and you can have that hot or already congealed. We also have it specially aged for — "

"You bring me anything green — especially porridge — especially old green porridge, and you'll have to get all your music transposed to a higher register."

"Sorry, sir. Perhaps you're more in the mood for something sweet. Our baker Patty's cakes are quite the treat. "

"Just bring me coffee. Black. And say, kid, what happened to the little girl that used to work here? Red hair. A real dish."

"Oh, she quit. Took a month's advance on her salary and vanished." He looked around before adding in a whisper — "Took most of the silverware with her when she went."

I gave him my card to give to the manager in case he wanted me to track down the fork filcher.

The coffee was hot and for some reason tasted like peas. While I

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waited for it to cool off enough to pour into the potted plant, I perused the paper.

The news was too depressing, the crossword puzzle was too hard and the comics were dull, so I gravitated to the classified ads.

Right under a plaintive plea from somebody named Peep looking for some lost livestock was this:

> WANTED: Pastry chef, must be honest and hard-working.
> No bird-watchers. Apply at Her Majesty's Royal Palace.

Hmm, I hadn't been undercover since those horrible humiliating days I spent disguised as a hog, waiting for Tommy Thomas, the bagpiper's boy, to purloin another piggy. Of course, I didn't know the difference between a pastry and a g-string, but with any luck — and surely I must be due for a dose — I'd have this case solved before I had to do any actual baking.

Going to work at the palace was a lot easier than I thought it would be. I didn't have to pass any tests or fill out any forms. I just hopped over the moat, banged on the back door of the castle and introduced myself.

"Hi, I'm Jack B. Goode and I'm — "

"Come in, come in." The old lady who answered the door grabbed me and pulled me into the kitchen. "Jack Goode, did you say? I thought you were a much skinnier man. How is your wife, still as obese as ever?"

"I don't have a — " But she just shoved a tall white hat and an apron at me and dragged me over to meet my mentor, an amiable, buck-toothed fella named Simon.

"Simon," she said, flinging open cabinet doors, "I thought I told you to restock these shelves. These cupboards are bare."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. H. I'll take care of it as soon as I get a chance." Simon sounded dog tired.

"Don't I know you from somewhur?" he asked me, after the boss lady left. "You look awful familiar."

I wasn't in the mood to explain that I wasn't whatever *National Enquirer* freak named Jack he thought I was, so I ignored his question and asked about the turnover rate in the royal kitchen.

"Oh, we never make turnovers. Charming can't stand 'em."

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Once I had clarified my query, I learned that the royals had been having a hard time keeping anybody in the position, what with one after another getting blamed for poisoning pies, and they were now drafting people into kitchen service. Simon was roped into the position when he couldn't afford to pay a traveling pie man for the treat he ate. Kind of ironic, I guess, that his sweet tooth led to him becoming indentured.

"If you can tell the difference between a blackbird and a blackberry you should be fine. It's not hard. Even I can do it, and I'm not very bright," Simon said. "But if you mess up and put a blackbird in there, heads will roll — and I 'm not using that as a figger of speech. I mean heads will roll — laterally.

"But don't worry, we're not making blackberry pies yet," Simon said. "We're starting off today making tarts. You know how to make tarts, dontcha?"

I started to worry that I might be in over my head here, but Simon told me not to worry.

"Just do whatever I do," Simon said.

"Does Prince Charming ever get down here?" I asked, thinking that if I could just get a quick man-to-man word with the Prince, he might know who was trying to poison him.

"The Prince? Down to the kitchen? Are you kidding?" Simon asked. "He's way too busy playing golf and polo and...uh, you know, being a prince."

It turned out that tarts were really just little pies with no crust on the top. My job was to knead and roll out the dough so Simon could shape it into little pie pans and send it on down the line to be filled with what looked like Granny Smith apples but for all I knew could have been blackbird guts.

Don't let anyone tell you that kneading dough is easy work. I was just about to ask Simon what time we got our bourbon break when some fool behind me blew a trumpet or a bugle or some other loud scary wind instrument, and Queen Charismatic herself sauntered into the kitchen.

Everybody cast down their eyes as she passed, but I don't know why. She wasn't the show-stopper that her daughter-in-law was, but she wasn't

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all that ugly for an old broad. Still, me and some old one-eared gray kitchen cat, who had been toying with a trio of sightless mice he'd captured, were the only ones brave enough to actually look at the Queen.

"I'm here to inspect the tarts," she sniffed regally.

"Does she usually inspect your work?" I asked Simon, but he was standing silently at attention. He might have nodded but I'm not sure. Once again, I followed Simon's lead, straightened my spine and unfocused my gaze.

The tarts weren't the only thing she inspected. As we all stood there, an unblinking grease-covered army, General Charismatic walked in front of and then behind our ranks. We stood there without moving for what seemed like ever. My legs were itching and I was wishing I remembered how to do those bird calls I almost learned when I was a lad.

"Where are the tarts?" shrieked the Queen.

Her henchman nodded to release us from suspended animation, and we turned to where the tarts were laid out, but they weren't. There, that is.

My co-workers really came alive now. We were looking in the pantries, up the chimney, everywhere we could think of for the missing tarts — or a way out of the castle.

"He did it," the Queen shouted. "I saw him! Grab that knave!"

I turned and gave the guy behind me a what-kind-of-miserable-scalawag-would-sink-so-low gaze, but it was a bluff. And a pretty pitiful one at that. I knew she was pointing at me.

So did her troops. The guards grabbed my arms and pulled my hands behind my back. The Queen yelled for somebody to get the Prince; the captain of the guards yelled for somebody to get the royal executioner; and I wished I had hit the snooze button on my alarm clock a few hundred more times this morning. Either that or hit Princess Ella up for money. If I'd known I was going to end up losing my head I woulda charged her at least twice what I did.

Some harried-looking lackey burst in with a prince — Prince Alluring, the youngest royal. From the way the underling's knees were knocking, I think he had a sneaking suspicion this was not who Charismatic had in mind.

"Where is Charming?" she sniped at the guy.

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"I called him just like you said, Your Majesty," he sputtered, "but the Prince is in the counting room, counting up his slip-ons. He said he didn't want to be disturbed."

"Why, that lazy loafer, I ought to — " She turned her royal attention back to me. "You are accused of stealing tarts. The penalty is death for you and several of your co-workers. How do you plead? Guilty or what?"

"Yer Majesty," I said, "I gotta tell ya the truth, I did steal a tart. Once. From my best friend Phil. But it was a long time ago and as soon as I found out what kind of girl she was I gave her back. Pilfering pastries is really not one of my vices."

"Hah! You stole them, and I bet you tried to poison Prince Charming. Everybody turn and face the doorway, so that you can hail the Prince when he arrives. I am going to inspect these blackberry pies."

It was at that moment as my captors spun me around away from the blackberry pies I had not even seen yet, that I decided to become a socialist — or a communist or a Buddhist or whoever it is that don't have these royal pains in the neck.

I knew Prince Charming was not coming. So did Queen Charismatic. I knew I didn't steal any tarts or put any bird parts in pies. So did Queen Charismatic. I also knew why she wanted us to turn our backs.

There was a "skritch-skritch" sound as one of the blind mice escaped from its tabby tormentor and scurried up a hickory grandfather clock. It wasn't much of a diversion, but it was gonna have to do.

"Look over there," I shouted. "It's Prince Charming. Behind us."

Everybody turned around but what we saw was not Prince Charming but Queen Charismatic. She was not just inspecting our pies, she was flavoring them.

It took a moment or two before she realized that her youngest son as well as her entire kitchen staff had just seen her pull a big dead black bird out of her purse and put it inside a pie crust.

To her credit she didn't try to bulldoze her way out of it. She said, "I...I never put enough in there to actually hurt him. I just wanted to make him see that being a monarch is a serious job. He won't grow up and stop playing, and I'm tired, I want to step down."

Nobody knew what to do now. Technically, it's not against the law for royals to break the law. Just when it looked like we were all going to

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spend the rest of our lives there, playing the who-can-look-the-stupidest game, the Queen took command.

"Let him go," she said to the guards holding me. "You can keep your head but not your job. You're fired."

Turning to the guards who had escorted her into the kitchen, she sighed and said, "Well, come on, let's get back to the throne room. I guess this reign is never going to go away."

As I was untying my apron and wondering if I had enough money to buy a bottle of rye to celebrate wrapping up this case, Simon stuck out his hand for me to shake.

"Wow," he said, "you are a great detective, I mean great. You solved one of the biggest mysteries of our time."

"You think so?"

"Yeah, I mean, I always wondered what she was lugging around in that purse of hers."

I handed him my card and he looked at it for a minute.

"Jack B. Goode? Now I know where I know you from," Simon said. "You can play a guitar just like a ringin' a bell, right?"

It was starting to dawn on me why everybody thought of Simon as simple.

"I'm sorry," I told him. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

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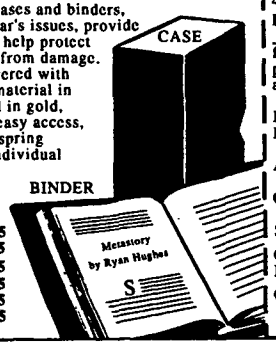

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

THE SOUL (OR LACK THEREOF) OF THE NEW MONSTER

EMMERICH and Devlin's *Godzilla* was a bomb.

Oh, it made plenty of money. (Although, it shows you how incredibly distorted things have become when a $55 million opening weekend is deemed "paltry" by show biz prognosticators!) When a flick ends up making over $375 million worldwide — before cable, video, and other secondary revenues — it's certainly a financial success. It's as film art, or simply as an afternoon's escapist entertainment, that 1998's *Godzilla* qualifies as the biggest bomb of recent memory.

"Size Matters," the movie's marketeers boasted. But it doesn't. Biggest has never equated best. (Not in the bedroom, nor in the movie house.) The ability to connect is what matters. A movie should captivate our minds and our emotions. It should delight, horrify, or, at the very least, surprise us. The best movies meet the old "I Laughed, I Cried" test of total engagement. With *Godzilla*, "I Cringed, I Fidgeted" was more the order of the day.

It goes without saying that, in any film, we need to care about the characters. And, for a movie like *Godzilla*, those characters *must* include the title monster. Therein lies the greatest failing of last summer's heavily hyped creature feature. Hollywood's Godzilla was devoid of personality. We didn't care what happened to that mega-lizard. Heck, we didn't even get a good look at him until three quarters of the way through the film. (Giant footprints and a swish of tail just don't do it.) And when we *did* get a good look at him, we didn't feel anything. His eyes were too small. And he was as cold and as impersonal

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as the computers who generated him.

The original Toho beastie was silly, but that was, at least, part of his charm. He was a rubber kiddie-toy, who bumped into buildings like a near-sighted drunk. And his toothy snarl almost looked like a giant grin. For most of us — unless we were extremely young when we first saw him — Japan's Godzilla wasn't particularly scary. But we did find him endearing and fun — which is more than can be said of the Devlin-Emmerich creature.

But in the best monster movies, we feel something more. We actually feel empathy for, and identification with, the cinematic demon. We become the monster. His persecution and fury resonates in our own experience of rejection, loneliness, and anger.

Perhaps no movie creature has captured our imagination more than Frankenstein. And the definitive movie Frankenstein — the one the scores of other movies have copied or countered — is the one brought to the screen by director James Whale (in the person of Boris Karloff), first in 1931, and then again in *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935).

That Mr. Whale identifies with his man-made grotesque seems certain. Just as clearly, the filmmaker wants us to do the same. And do we ever! Our sympathies are so engaged by this tottering ghoul that we love him even when he "murders" an innocent child. In that famous scene — censored when the film was first released — the monster makes friends with a small girl who shows him how to float daisies on a lake. Delighted, he decides to pop her in the water, too. Only she doesn't float. She drowns. And the monster can only stumble away in despair.

It's an amazing screen moment. Comical and deeply disturbing, it violates a dozen taboos all at once. And so it is with much of Whale's work. Especially *Bride of Frankenstein*, which stands as his masterwork, and (to my mind) the greatest horror film ever made.

Bride is a wicked and wonder-filled movie. It is frightening, poignant, macabre, satirical, and then some. You laugh. You cry. You are astounded by Whale's ability to graft Hollywood flash to European Expressionism. And in the devilishly arch performance of Ernest Thesiger as Dr. Pretorious you realize that you are witnessing the genesis of cinematic high camp at its most deliciously perverse.

Whale takes us to an inverted world in which a murderous hulk

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implanted with an "abnormal" brain appears sweetly heroic (and even, as the film pointedly shows, Christlike), while regular folk appear ugly and violent. And noblemen scientists? Those guys are seriously deranged.

When you watch *Bride of Frankenstein*, it's easy to speculate on the kind of imagination that could have envisioned such a film. And, since the 1970s, many people have done just that. The fact that James Whale was an uncloseted gay filmmaker is a matter of special attention. Is his aesthetic a homosexual one? And is homophobic repression the reason Whale walked away from Hollywood while he was still in his prime? And what later caused a sixty-seven-year-old Whale to dress in his favorite suit and drown himself in his backyard pool?

You could write entire books about such things. And several authors have. Among them, novelist Christopher Bram, who published a biographical novel called *Father of Frankenstein* back in 1995. The novel superimposed fictional situations (notably Whale's relationship with a make-believe yardman) onto the known facts of his life, career, and his final days leading up to his suicide.

The novel reads much like a movie. Which isn't surprising, since Bram had originally planned it as a screenplay. And although his book was no bestseller, it piqued immediate interest in the film community as a good candidate for screen adaptation. One of those interested was a minor filmmaker and screenwriter named Bill Condon.

Condon had directed TV movies and couple of dubious horror features (including *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh*, 1995), but sf fans will remember him best as cowriter of the 1983 "cult classic," *Strange Invaders*. Not being particularly high on the Hollywood food chain, Condon had little chance of acquiring the Bram property. That is, until Tim Burton's brilliant flop *Ed Wood* was released. The failure of that movie made the major studios back right away from Whale's story. But not Mr. Condon.

Enlisting the help of modern horrormeister Clive Barker (who, like Whale before him, is an artistically inclined, out gay British filmmaker working in Hollywood) as executive producer, Condon secured a tiny budget of $3 million and the massive acting talents of Sir Ian McKellen, and set about filming his own screenplay of Bram's novel during a feverish twenty-four-day shoot.

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The resulting *Gods and Monsters* is almost as astounding as *Bride of Frankenstein* (which is fleetingly reproduced in dream and memory sequences throughout Condon's film). Like Bram, Condon focuses on the final days of Whale during the spring of 1957.

Long retired from Hollywood, Whale had recently suffered a stroke ("an electrical storm inside his head") that altered his senses, and distorted his thoughts. Present experience, real-life memories, film scenes, and hallucinations all interweave in Whale's troubled mind. And it is through these delusions and nightmares that the viewer gets a glimpse of the experiential subtext of Whale's groundbreaking work in the horror film.

Yes, being gay heightened his sense of otherness, as he ran from a brutal, working-class background and a father who believed that being labeled a "nancy boy" was the ultimate shame. And the horror of dismembered bodies and broken lives was something Whale knew firsthand, as well. Flashbacks of World War I foxholes, and the lover he lost to the carnage, also colored his work.

If *Gods and Monsters* did nothing more than show us the source material of one filmmaker's brilliance, it would be worth the price of admission. Especially when the filmmaker is played by Ian McKellen, and the melding of fantasy and reality is so hauntingly reproduced through Mr. Condon's hallucinatory vignettes. But this movie doesn't stop there. It plays out within the most amazing little parlor drama, as Whale develops a relationship with his yardman, Clayton Boone (Brendan Fraser, very good in the role).

At first, it seems as though Whale is interested in the much younger Boone merely as a possible sexual conquest. (And, stripped to the waist for his mowing, the hunky Mr. Fraser does look like someone any rational human might want to seduce.) But as Whale cajoles Boone into posing for some sketches, and the two talk, a more complex friendship evolves.

Boone is very much Whale's "other." He is young, vital, macho, and, yes, heterosexual. A loner who seems closed off from his own experiences and feelings, you might call him a completely normal American male. But is he really the monster? He appears as such in some of Whale's flights of fantasy. And when we see flashes of Boone's anger toward his sometime girlfriend, Betty (Lolita Davidovich, in a woefully

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underwritten role), and toward his employer when he fears a possible seduction, we begin to wonder what kind of dangerous end-game James Whale might be playing.

But the growing symbiotic relationship between these two very different men flirts with, but never degrades into, cheap drama or even cheaper sex farce. What *Gods and Monsters* presents is a short, intense alliance that allows both men to transition their lives to the next level: Whale to death, and Boone to getting on with his life.

It's fascinating stuff. And so are most of the sidelights and secondary roles Mr. Condon creates to fill out his story even further. Lynn Redgrave does a wonderful turn as Whale's devout and dowdy housekeeper, Hanna. It's a character role that Redgrave plays to the hilt (rather like Whale's ensemble players Colin Clive and Una O'Connor do in *Bride*).

And no movie fan should miss Condon's staging of a garden party for Princess Margaret thrown by (closeted gay) director George Cukor. Star lookalikes abound, and young Boone gets to meet his first royalty. ("He's never met a princess," Whale confides to a clueless Margaret, to the evident vexation of Cukor. "Only *queens*.")

Gods and Monsters is one of the best films of the year, which means, of course, that it won't get widely distributed. If you don't live in a major city or a university town, there's a good chance you didn't get a chance to see it at theaters. That's what video is for. Do what you need to do to see this film. It's that good. (And just plain entertaining, to boot.)

It also provides glorious insights into where movie horror comes from. It comes from the experiential jumble in the minds of the artists who create it. And it comes from what we bring to the screen as viewers. In a small but important scene, several of the film's characters watch a TV showing of *Bride*, and see much different films. The religious Hanna finds it a fearful morality tale in which the bad must be punished. Betty, who considers herself a modern sophisticate, can't get past the film's evident age, and rejects it as dated trash. And Boone delights in its humor and its lyrical sadness. He feels the magic.

He is the monster. And, as Bill Condon knows, so are we all.

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Delia Sherman is the author of two acclaimed fantasy novels, Through a Brazen Mirror *and* The Porcelain Dove. *She is currently at work on a new book,* The Freedom Maze, *but she took time out from it to concoct this pastiche, a Victorian penny dreadful in such a manner as Anthony Trollope might have produced, had he set his pen to it. You might recognize a name or three here if you know Victorian literature, but you certainly don't need a degree in literature to enjoy this most agreeable diversion.*

The Parwat Ruby

By Delia Sherman

WHETHER THE DISASTER OF the Parwat Ruby would have taken place if Sir Alvord Basingstoke had not married Margaret Kennedy is a matter of conjecture. Given his character, Sir Alvord would undoubtedly have married a woman like Margaret if Margaret herself had never been born. For Sir Alvord was a gentle man, silent in company, devoted to solitude — in short, the natural mate of a woman who talked a great deal and loved society. In her youth, Margaret Kennedy had been much courted, being lively and clever and very well dressed, as well as mistress of three thousand pounds a year. Over time, she grew domineering and unpleasant as well, but as Sir Alvord spent the best part of the next thirty years exploring uncharted wildernesses, it is likely that he did not notice. When ebbing vital forces put a period to his travels, Lady Glencora Palliser prophesied a speedy separation. But months passed, and still the reunited couple showed every sign of mutual affection, demonstrating that even the most dedicated hunters of human weakness must sometimes draw a blank.

Some two years after returning from his last journey, Sir Alvord called

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upon his sister, Mrs. Mildmay. A certain coolness having long ago arisen between Mrs. Mildmay and Lady Basingstoke, Mrs. Mildmay had seen little of her brother in that time. Consequently, she was much astonished, one evening as the Season began, to hear her maid announce the name of Sir Alvord Basingstoke. It was time to be thinking of changing for supper; nevertheless, she had him shown into her sitting room, and received him with a sisterly embrace.

"So here you are, Alvord," she said. "Handsome as ever, I see." It had been a schoolroom joke that they looked very alike, although the heavy jaw and pronounced nose that made him a handsome man kept her from being considered anything but plain.

He pressed her hands and put her from him. "I have something very particular to say to you, Caroline. You're my only sister — indeed, my only living blood relation — and I am an old man."

Somewhat distressed by this greeting, Mrs. Mildmay bade her brother sit and indicated her readiness to hear what he had to tell her, but he only sighed heavily and rubbed his forehead with his right hand, which was decorated with a ring set with a large cabochon ruby. The ring was familiar to her, as much a part of Sir Alvord as his pale blue eyes and his indifferently tailored coats. He had brought the stone back from a journey to Ceylon in his youth and it had never left his hand since. Massy as it was, it had always looked perfectly at home on his broad hand, but now it hung and turned loosely on his finger.

The white star that lived in its depths slid and winked, capturing Mrs. Mildmay's eye and attention so fully that when Sir Alvord spoke, she was forced to beg him to repeat his words.

"It's this ring of mine, Caroline," said Sir Alvord patiently. "It's more than a trinket."

"Indeed it is, brother. I've never seen such a fine stone."

"A fine stone indeed. Your true, clear star is very rare and very precious in a ruby of this size. But that is not what I meant. There is a history attached to this ring and a responsibility."

He seemed to experience some difficulty in continuing, a difficulty not remarkable in a man who all his life had been accustomed to let first his mother and then his wife speak for him. Mrs. Mildmay sat quietly until he should find words.

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"This is unexpectedly difficult," he said at length.

Mrs. Mildmay looked down at her hands. "I have often wished us better friends," she said.

"I have wished the same. But my wife had a claim upon my loyalty."

Mrs. Mildmay flushed and would have retorted that she hoped that his sister had at least an equal claim, but he held up his hand to forestall her, his ruby flashing like a diamond as the star caught the afternoon sun.

He continued, "I have not come to quarrel with you. Margaret has been a good wife to me. However, I don't mean for her to have this ring. I had hoped to leave it to a son of mine" — here he sighed once again — "but that was not to be. I have it in my mind to put in my Will that you're to have it when I die, and that it must pass to Wilson after you." Wilson was Mrs. Mildmay's oldest son, a likely young man of four-and-twenty.

Mrs. Mildmay, much moved, reached out and patted her brother's hand. "There's no need to be talking of wills and dying, brother. I've no doubt you'll see out your century with ease."

"And I have no doubt that I will not see out the year. No, Caroline, don't argue with me. The ring must stay in the family." He rose slowly and tottered as he stood, so that Mrs. Mildmay sprang to her feet to steady him. Once more he kissed her cheek. "God bless you, Caroline. I don't suppose I'll see you again."

After this conversation, Mrs. Mildmay was not much amazed when, not three days later, she received word that Sir Alvord had suffered an apoplectic fit. At first, his life was despaired of, and even when it seemed sure he would live, he could no longer move his arms or legs, but must be fed and turned and bathed like an infant. In this great exigency, Lady Basingstoke displayed all the careful tenderness that could be hoped from a loving wife and, although she was herself not a young woman, undertook the entire burden of his nursing. To be sure, there were nurses hired to tend him, but Lady Basingstoke considered them all worthless baggages and would not leave any of them alone with him for more than a few moments. So it was that when Mrs. Mildmay called to inquire after her brother's health, Lady Basingstoke did not come down to her, but received her in Sir Alvord's dressing-room with the communicating door ajar.

She was seated in a shabby wing-chair, her head inclined upon her

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hand in an attitude eloquent of the most complete dejection, but she lifted her head at Mrs. Mildmay's entrance and waved her feebly to a chair. "Please forgive me not rising to greet you, dear Caroline," she said. "I am utterly prostrate, as you see. He had a very bad night, and this morning was discovered to be unable to speak. Sir Omicron Pie has warned me to prepare myself for the worst."

Mrs. Mildmay may have considered her brother's wife a harpy and a fool, but it would be a harder heart than hers to have denied Lady Basingstoke a sister's comfort at such a time. "My dear Margaret," she said. "I am so very sorry. You must let me know if there is anything I may do to help you. Sit with Alvord, perhaps, so that you can take some rest?"

"No, no. You are too kind, Caroline, but no. Dear Alvord will suffer no one about him but me." Her voice faltered and she raised her hand to her eyes, as though to hide springing tears. The gesture reminded Mrs. Mildmay irresistibly of her brother's when he had come to call, the more so that it displayed Lady Basingstoke's hand, well-kept and very large for a woman, just now made to look delicate by a great gold ring set with a single large, red stone: the Parwat Ruby.

"I beg your pardon, Margaret," said Mrs. Mildmay, "but is that not Alvord's ring?"

The question caused Lady Basingstoke to have recourse to her handkerchief, and it was not until she had composed herself that she said, "He gave it to me last night. It was as though he knew he'd soon be beyond speech, for he took it from his finger and put it upon mine, saying that it was the dearest wish of his heart to see it always upon my hand. It is, of course, far too big, but I have tied it on with a bit of cotton, which I trust will hold it until I can bear to be parted with it long enough to have it made to fit."

"How very touching," said Mrs. Mildmay. There was nothing so very exceptionable in her tone, but Lady Basingstoke absolutely frowned at her and requested her to explain what she meant.

"Only that dear Alvord was not commonly so fluent in his speech."

"I think, dear Mrs. Mildmay, that you are hardly qualified to have an opinion," said Lady Basingstoke, "considering that you have hardly spoken to him twice in twenty years. I assure you it took place just as I have told you."

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"No doubt," answered Mrs. Mildmay, and took her leave not many minutes afterward. It is not, perhaps, necessary to say that Mrs. Mildmay had every doubt as to the accuracy of Lady Basingstoke's recollection, but she could hardly say so. An evening call is not a Will, after all, and her brother had every right to change his mind as to the distribution of his own property.

NOW LADY BASINGSTOKE was even more indispensable to Sir Alvord than when he had been merely bed-bound, for she was the only one who could make shift to understand his gruntings and gesturings and bring him a little ease. In fact, she dispensed with the nurses altogether and snatched her rest when she might upon a trundle bed in Sir Alvord's dressing-room, for he would become unbearably agitated in her absence. Sir Omicron Pie continued to call each morning, but he could do nothing above prescribing a calming draught. Given the tenor of her last visit, Mrs. Mildmay was not surprised when the butler turned her from the door when next she came to call. But she was much astonished the following morning, when she read the notice of Sir Alvord Basingstoke's death in *The Times*.

"It's a bad business," she exclaimed to her husband, who was enjoying the text of Mr. Gresham's latest speech. "It's a bad business when a sister must read of her brother's passing in the public press."

"Not at all, my dear. Devoted wife, prostrate widow. Likely it slipped her mind. Here's Gresham rabbitting on about the poor again, as if *he* could do anything, with his party feeling as it does about taxes. It's a crime, that's what it is. A crime and a sin."

"I daresay, Quintus, but do pay attention. When I called yesterday afternoon, the curtains were not drawn, there was no crepe on the knocker, and the butler said only that his mistress was not at home to visitors."

"Man wasn't dead yet," said Mr. Mildmay reasonably.

"Nonsense," said his wife. "I defy even the most energetic widow to get a notice of death in *The Times* in anything under a day, and if he were alive when I called, she could have had only a few hours. I call it a bad business."

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"Odd, anyway," said Mr. Mildmay. "Wonder if he left you anything?"

"As if I cared about that! He did mention his ruby ring to me when last I saw him, but I doubt that anything will come of it."

Mr. Mildmay put down his paper. "His ruby, eh? Worth a good few hundred pounds, I'd think. The ruby would be worth having indeed."

"The ring may be worth what it will, Quintus. My point is that Alvord expressed the wish that it remain in the family, and yet I saw it upon Lady Basingstoke's hand."

"Woman's his wife, Caroline. A wife is part of a man's family, I hope."

"Not when she's a widow, Quintus, for she may then marry again and take her husband's property into another man's family."

"Then we must hope that your brother put the thing down in his Will." Mr. Mildmay took up his paper again to show that the subject was closed, firing as he did so a warning shot around its crackling edges: "Won't look well to make a fuss, Caroline."

Mrs. Mildmay so far agreed with her husband that she was able to pay her condolence call and support the grieving widow at Sir Alvord's funeral without adverting to the subject of Sir Alvord's last visit. Yet as she stood next to Lady Basingstoke at the graveside, she could not suppress a shudder at the sight of the Parwat Ruby glowing balefully against the deep black of the widow's wash-leather gloves. She could not think it well-done of Margaret to have worn it, hoping only that her grief had blinded her to the impropriety of flaunting a ruby at a funeral. Yet, as the first shovelfuls of dirt fell upon the casket, Mrs. Mildmay could have sworn that the widow was smiling.

"But she was heavily veiled," exclaimed her bosom friend Lady Fitzaskerly when Mrs. Mildmay had unburdened herself of her righteous anger.

"Nonetheless," said Mrs. Mildmay. "You know what she looks like."

"A horse in a flaxen wig," replied Lady Fitzaskerly, who disliked Lady Basingstoke as heartily as the most exacting friend could wish.

"Precisely. And the heaviest veil to be purchased at Liberty's would be insufficient to hide the most subtle of her expressions. The woman was grinning like an ape. And there was no mention of the ring in the Will — not a single word, though many of his collections are dispersed and the entire contents of his library are to be given to his club."

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"Perhaps he fell ill before the lawyer might be called."

"Perhaps. And perhaps he didn't. I thought Mr. Chess wished to speak to me when the document had been read, but Lady Basingstoke entirely engaged his attention. And now here is a note from Mr. Chess in the first mail this morning, begging me to receive him at four this very afternoon. What do you think of that?"

Lady Fitzaskerly did not know what to think, but she found the whole matter so very interesting that she could not forbear mentioning it to Lady Glencora Palliser when next she had occasion to call upon her. Lady Glen was sitting, as she often was, with Madam Max Goesler of Park Lane.

"Why, it's just like the Eustace diamonds!" Lady Glencora exclaimed when Lady Fitzaskerly had done. "You remember the fuss, when that silly girl Lizzie Eustace stole her own diamonds to keep them from the hands of her husband's family?"

"It's not so very much like it, not to my mind," said Madam Max. "No one has stolen anything, so far as I can tell. A gentleman in his dotage has changed his mind about the disposition of his personal property and created an unpleasantness."

"Well, I think Mrs. Mildmay is hardly used in the matter."

"Consider, my dear. Lady Basingstoke is his widow. She cared for him in his last illness and shared his interests."

"His interests!" Lady Glencora was scornful. "We best not inquire too closely into his interests, if all I hear be true."

"Surely, Lady Glen, you can't believe he was a wizard," exclaimed Lady Fitzaskerly. "Why, he wasn't even interested in politics."

"Well, he *was* a member of the Magus," said Lady Glen. "And he left all his books to his club. What else am I to believe?"

"If he was a wizard," said Lady Fitzaskerly, "he was a decidedly odd one."

"Perhaps he wasn't, then," Lady Glen said. "Wizards like nothing better than talking, and they seldom travel. Well, how could they? Sir Alvord barely said a word in company, and he was forever in some foreign land or another."

"Be that as it may," said Madam Max. "If he was a wizard, it is foolhardy at best for Lady Basingstoke to keep his ring if he wished it to go otherwhere."

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"No doubt," said Lady Fitzaskerly dryly. "But I knew Margaret Kennedy at school. She was the sort of girl who *always* ate too many cream buns, even though she was invariably sick after."

So Mrs. Mildmay had her partisans among the most highly placed persons in the land — a fact that might have brought her some comfort as she sat listening to her brother's lawyer set forth his dilemma in her drawing-room. Mr. Chess was a man of substance, silver-haired and solid as an Irish hound, with something of a hound's roughness of coat and honesty of spirit, which had brought him to confess to Mrs. Mildmay that he had misplaced the most recent codicil to her brother's Will.

"It was the day he was taken ill, you know, or perhaps a day or two before that. He came by my chambers without the least notice, and would have it drawn up then and there and witnessed by two clerks. It described the ring most particularly — 'The stone called the Parwat Ruby, and the Ring in which it is set, the bezel two Wings of gold tapering into the Shank' — and gave it to you for your lifetime and to your son Wilson on your death, with the testator's recommendation that neither ring nor stone be allowed to pass out of the hands of his descendants. He insisted on the exact wording."

"And you said that the codicil was not in the document-box when you removed the Will to read it?"

"The document-box was quite empty, Mrs. Mildmay, save for the Will itself, some few papers pertaining to his investments, and a quantity of fine dust. Nevertheless, knowing his wishes in the matter, I did not think it wise to drop the matter without consulting with Lady Basingstoke."

"And Lady Basingstoke laughed in your face," said Mrs. Mildmay.

"I only wish she had done something so relatively predictable." Mr. Chess extracted his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead with it. "She heard me out quietly, then gave me to understand that the ring would have to be cut from her hand before she'd give it up. Furthermore, she impugned my memory, my competence as a lawyer, even my motives in coming to see her, and all in such a tone of voice as I hope never in my life to hear again."

"It was doubtless very rude of her," said Mrs. Mildmay soothingly.

"Rude!" Mr. Chess gave his neck a surreptitious dab. "She was most

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intemperate. If she were not very recently widowed, I would question her sanity."

"And the ring?"

"Unless the codicil should come to light, the ring is hers, along with all her husband's chattels and possessions not otherwise disposed of. We might file a case in Chancery on the basis of my recollection of the afternoon call, supported by affidavits from my two clerks who witnessed the document, but it would almost certainly cost more than the ring is worth, and success is by no means sure."

Mrs. Mildmay thought for a moment, than gave a decided nod. "I'll let it go, then. It's only a ring, after all. May she have joy of it, poor woman."

And there the matter would have rested had it not been for Lady Basingstoke herself, who, some two weeks after her husband's death, wrote to Caroline Mildmay requiring her attendance in Grovesnor Square. *You know I would come to you if I might,* she wrote, *but I am grown so ill that I cannot stir a foot abroad.*

"I shouldn't go," said Mr. Mildmay when his wife showed him Lady Basingstoke's letter. "You owe her nothing and she'll only be unpleasant."

"I owe her kindness as my brother's widow, and if she is unpleasant, I need not prolong my visit."

Mr. Mildmay smiled knowingly upon his wife. "I know how it is, Caroline. You're eaten up with curiosity over what she could have to say to you. Wild horses would not keep you from her, were she five times worse than she is."

"I don't expect to find her so ill as all that," said Mrs. Mildmay provokingly. But she did not deny her husband's allegation, nor, in good conscience, could she. Indeed, she did not think Lady Basingstoke likely to be ill at all. But when she was shown into the parlor where Lady Basingstoke was laid down upon a sofa with a blanket over her feet, Mrs. Mildmay observed that she looked withered and drawn, with the bones of her cheeks staring out through her skin and great dark smudges beneath her eyes, which seemed to have retreated under her brows. The Parwat Ruby glowed like a live coal on her hand.

She was attended by a dark-skinned person in a white turban, who was introduced to Mrs. Mildmay as Mr. Ahmed, an Arab gentleman learned in the study of medicine and the arcane arts.

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"Mr. Ahmed has been invaluable to me," said Lady Basingstoke, and held out her hand, which he kissed with great grace; though it seemed to Mrs. Mildmay, looking on with some disgust, that the salute was bestowed rather upon the Parwat Ruby than on the gaunt hand that bore it. "It is at his suggestion, in fact, that I called you here, Caroline. You know, of course, that dear Alvord was a great wizard?"

Mrs. Mildmay drew off her gloves to cover her confusion. "A wizard, Margaret?"

"I think I spoke clearly. Are you going to pretend that you don't believe in wizards when the country is ruled by them? Why, half the members of the House of Lords, two-thirds of the Cabinet, and the Prime Minister himself are members of the Magus!"

"I hardly know what I do believe, Margaret."

"There was never a wizard living as powerful as Alvord, and it was all the ruby, Caroline, the ruby."

"The ruby?" Mrs. Mildmay faltered, convinced that Lady Basingstoke's complaint was more serious than a mere perturbation of the spirit. Alvord a wizard! What would the woman say next?

Lady Basingstoke plucked angrily at the fringe of her shawl. "Why do you mock me, Caroline? You must know what I mean. Alvord must have spoken to you. Why else would he have called on you so soon before he fell ill?"

"I assure you, Margaret, that Alvord told me nothing. Only...."

Lady Basingstoke leaned forward, a horrid avidity suffusing her countenance. "Only what, dear Caroline? It is of the utmost importance that you tell me every word."

"I'm afraid it must cause you some distress."

The Arab gentleman added his voice to Lady Basingstoke's, and reluctantly Mrs. Mildmay recounted her conversation with Sir Alvord substantially as it has been recorded here, noting Lady Basingstoke's almost comical expression of malicious triumph when Caroline mentioned her brother's intention to change his will. When she had made an end, Lady Basingstoke turned to the Arab gentleman and burst out, "Is there anything there, Ahmed? Is she telling the truth?"

"As to that, gracious lady, I cannot say without subjecting the lady to certain tests."

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He smiled beguilingly at Mrs. Mildmay as he spoke, as if proposing a rare treat. Mrs. Mildmay was not to be beguiled. "Tests!" she exclaimed. "Are you both mad?"

Both Lady Basingstoke and the Arab gentleman ignored her. "Your husband certainly meant his sister to have the ring, lady, and I do not think he told her why."

"Well, I think he did. I think he told her all about it, and she's come here to frighten me out of it. Well, I won't frighten, do you hear? I won't frighten and I won't give up the Parwat Ruby. It's going to make me great, isn't it, Ahmed? Greater than Mr. Gresham, greater than the Queen herself, and once I learn its secret, the first thing I shall do is destroy *you*, Caroline Mildmay!"

With every word of this extraordinary speech, Lady Basingstoke's voice rose, until at last she was all but screaming at her hapless sister-in-law, at the same time rising from her sofa and menacing her with such energy that Mrs. Mildmay thought it best to take her leave.

AFTER SUCH an interview, Mrs. Mildmay did not, of course, call in Grovesnor Place again. Nor did she ever tell a soul, saving only her husband, what had passed between her and her sister-in-law. She did, however, hear what the world had to say concerning Lady Basingstoke's subsequent behavior. For that lady, far from hiding herself in the seclusion expected of a widow, began to go abroad in the world.

"I saw her in Hyde Park, my dear, *astride* her horse, if you please. I would not have credited it had I not seen it with my own eyes. And looking quite brown and dried-up, for all the world like a farm-wife, and so hideously plain you'd think that horrid Darwin justified in declaring us all the grandchildren of apes."

"Lady Glencora!" Madam Max admonished her, with a glance at Mrs. Mildmay.

Lady Glencora was at once contrite. "Oh, Mrs. Mildmay, I *beg* your pardon to speak so of a close connection, but surely the woman is not mistress of herself, to be riding astride in the company of a gentleman in a turban."

"Mr. Ahmed," murmured Mrs. Mildmay.

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"He might be the Grand Cham of Arabia if he chose; it still wouldn't be proper. And it is common knowledge that her servants have left her without notice, and Lizzie Berry says her new boot boy tells such blood-curdling stories of Lady Basingstoke's household that the servants all suffer from nightmares."

Feeling Lady Glencora's curious eyes upon her, Mrs. Mildmay schooled her features to gentle dismay. "How difficult for Lady Berry," was all she said, but her heart burned within her, and she thought of Lady Basingstoke's astonishing remark, that England was governed by wizards. Lady Glencora's husband, Plantagenet Palliser, was said to be performing miracles as Chancellor of the Exchecquer. Were they miracles indeed? Did Lady Glencora think she knew, or was she deriving amusement from her ignorance? Prey to melancholy reflections, Mrs. Mildmay brought her visit to an end as soon as she might do so without betraying the agitation the conversation had caused her, and went home again wishing that Alvord had seen fit to take her more fully into his confidence.

A month passed. The Season's round of balls and card-parties was enlivened by stories of Lady Basingstoke's eccentricities, which grew wilder with each telling. Lady Basingstoke had thrown scones at the waiter at Liberty's Tea Room; Lady Basingstoke had snatched a fruit-woman's basket of apples and run away with it; Lady Basingstoke had bitten a policeman on the arm. Mrs. Mildmay was privately mortified by her sister-in-law's behavior, and took full advantage of her own state of mourning to regret all invitations that might bring her into Lady Basingstoke's erratic orbit. But she could not avoid the morning-calls of ladies eager to commiserate and analyze, nor the occasional glimpse of her brother's widow, gaunt, unkempt, and draped in black, dragging on Mr. Ahmed's arm as if it were all that kept her upright.

Then, as suddenly as she'd emerged, Lady Basingstoke disappeared once again into Grovesnor Place. Society looked elsewhere for its amusement, and as the Season wore on, Mrs. Mildmay ventured to hope that she had heard the end of the matter. In mid-July, her hope was frustrated by Mr. Chess, who called upon her once again, this time accompanied by one of his clerks.

"I don't know how sufficiently to beg your pardon," Mr. Chess told her, his honest hound's eyes dark with distress.

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"It wasn't Mr. Chess's fault, madam," his clerk said. "It was all mine. If you intend to go to law with someone, it'll have to be me, and I won't contest the charge, indeed I won't."

"Let us have no talk of going to law," said Mrs. Mildmay. "Please, tell me what has happened."

And so the unhappy story came out. Apparently, the afternoon of the day upon which Sir Alvord had changed his will, he had returned to Mr. Chess's chambers and left in the possession of the clerk (whose name was Mr. Rattler) a thick packet, with instructions that it be conveyed to Mrs. Mildmay as soon as possible.

"But it *wasn't* possible, not if it were ever so, not with the Queen vs. Phineas Finn coming up to trial, and me run clear off my feet until ten of the clock. So I took it home so as to be sure and deliver it next morning on my way to chambers, and my old mother was taken ill in the night, and that's the last I thought of the packet until I was sorting through things yesterday — for she died of her illness, I grieve to say, and the house is to be sold — and found it, dropped behind the boot-rack."

The poor man looked so close to tears that Mrs. Mildmay was moved to give him her full forgiveness. "I have the packet in my hand now, after all, and we must hope that there's not too much harm done. Why don't you wait in the library while I read it, Mr. Chess, in case there is something in it I don't understand?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Mildmay," said Mr. Chess, and withdrew, herding the wretched clerk before him.

Now, if the reader be tempted, like Mrs. Mildmay, to pity Mr. Rattler, the reader may put his mind at ease. Mr. Rattler, less honest than provident, was not to be pitied; for upon discovering Sir Alvord's packet behind the boot-rack, he had lifted its seal with the aid of a heated knife, read it through, whistled thoughtfully, and immediately set himself to copy it all over. It was a long document, and the task took him the better part of the night, but his labor was well paid, for he sold the copy to one of the more sensational papers for a sum sufficient to buy passage to America, where we may only hope he found honest employment. Mr. Rattler's industry, in the meantime, has relieved the present writer of reproducing the whole text of Sir Alvord's letter to his sister, as the document was published in full soon after the Grovesnor Place affair

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became public, and may be read by anyone who cares to ask for the July ___ edition of *The People's Banner.*

In brief, the letter recounted how, not long after his marriage to Margaret Kennedy, Sir Alvord Basingstoke had taken himself off to Ceylon, where he had wandered, lost in impenetrable forests, for nearly two years. His adventures in this period were numerous, but in the letter, he restricted himself to the month he spent with a tribe of savages who worshipped an idol in the shape of a great ape carved of wood and inlaid with gold and precious stones.

"Its teeth were pearls, perfectly matched, the largest I have ever seen, and it was crowned with beaten gold set, in the Eastern manner, with rough-cut sapphires, emeralds, and rubies. But its chiefest glory were its eyes, that were perfectly matched cabochon rubies of great size, each imprisoning a perfect, clear, bright star that gave the creature an air of malevolent intelligence. I chaffered with the king of those people, who was a wise and far-sighted woman, and brought her to understand that it would be much to her advantage to accept from me half the arms and ammunition I had brought with me, along with certain cantrips I had learned of a warrior-wizard in Katmandu. In exchange for all this, which would almost certainly ensure her victory over some two or three neighboring tribes, I would receive the left eye of the ape-god.

"The gift came hedged around with warnings and restrictions, the greater part of which I have been able to circumvent or neutralize. I could do little, however, with the fundamental nature of the stone, which is likely to manifest itself in the form of a dreadful curse. I am exempt from this curse, as are all persons related to me by blood. But anyone else who wears it upon his finger, be it the Queen of England or Mr. Gresham or His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, will most assuredly and inevitably regret it. If you do not feel equal to the role of caretaker, dear Caroline, or harbor any doubts as to the fitness of young Wilson to undertake this responsibility, I enjoin you to send to (mentioning the name and direction of a gentleman whose position in Society commands our complete discretion) and tell him how the land lies. He'll know what to do. You'll need to call upon him in any case, to initiate you and your boy into the uses and rituals of the stone."

In the course of reading this extraordinary document, Mrs. Mildmay

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was forced to ring for brandy, and when she had finished, sat for a few minutes with the sheets of her brother's narrative spread on her knees. Poor Alvord, she thought. And poor Margaret. She rang again for Mr. Chess and his clerk, and her hat and cloak, and her carriage to take them all to Grovesnor Place.

"For I'll certainly want you for witnesses or help, or both," she told them. "And there's not a moment to be lost, not that it probably isn't too late already."

When the carriage pulled up to Lady Basingstoke's house, all seemed as it should be, save that the steps clearly had not been swept nor the door brass polished in some time.

"There, you see?" said Mrs. Mildmay. "Something is dreadfully amiss. It is unlike Margaret not to have hired new servants."

"Perhaps she couldn't hire any," Mr. Chess suggested.

"Servants are always to be had in London," said Mrs. Mildmay, "times being hard as they are."

A distant crash within put an end to idle conversation and inspired Mr. Chess to try the door, which was locked. A thin, inhuman screech from an upper floor sent him backing hastily down the steps, drawing Mrs. Mildmay, protesting, by the arm. "This is a matter for the police, dear lady, or perhaps a mad doctor. Rattler, find a constable."

While Rattler was searching out a member of the constabulary, Mr. Chess suggested that some tale be agreed on to explain the necessity of breaking into the town residence of a respectable baronet's widow, but in the event, no explanation was demanded, for such a screeching and crashing greeted the constable's advent as to lend considerable weight to Mrs. Mildmay's plea that the door be forced at once.

With a blow of the constable's truncheon, the lock was broken. He set his broad shoulder to the door, and, with the help of Mr. Chess and Mr. Rattler, thrust it open upon a scene of chaos. The rugs had been tumbled about and smeared with filth. Furniture had been overturned, paintings ripped from the walls, draperies torn, and a display of native weapons cast down from the wall. The noise had ceased upon their entrance, and a deathly, listening silence brooded over the ruined hall.

Mrs. Mildmay was the first of the quartet to regain her presence of mind. She stepped forward to the foot of the stairs and called: "Margaret,

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are you there? It is Caroline Mildmay, with Mr. Chess and a constable. Answer us if you can."

At the sound of her voice, the noise began again, a wild gibbering and screeching like a soul in torment, and suddenly a figure appeared upon the gallery above the hall. Mrs. Mildmay at first supposed it to be Lady Basingstoke, rendered thin and stooped by illness, for it was wrapped in a voluminous pale dressing-gown. But then the figure tore off the gown, threw it down upon the pale faces turned up to it, and swung itself from the gallery high over their heads to the great central chandelier, where it crouched, chattering angrily.

"It's an ape," said Mr. Chess unnecessarily.

"And a bleedin' 'uge un," said the constable, "beggin' the lady's parding."

But Mrs. Mildmay hardly noticed, for she was examining the creature — which was indeed one of the great apes that make their homes in the remoter reaches of the East — with more dismay than fear. "Why, it's Margaret," she exclaimed. "I'd know that chin anywhere. Oh, Mr. Chess!"

"Pray calm yourself, Mrs. Mildmay. Mr. Rattler shall alert this rude fellow's superiors of our predicament so that he may have help in subduing the creature, after which we may search the house for news of Lady Basingstoke."

"But we *have* news of Lady Basingstoke, I tell you! Look at her!" Mrs. Mildmay indicated the ape in the chandelier, whereupon the creature burst into a frenzy of hooting and bounced furiously up and down.

"*Pray*, Mrs. Mildmay, don't agitate it, or you'll have it down on our heads. Perhaps you'd best step outside until it is disposed of. This is no place for a lady, madam. Let the official gentlemen do their jobs and we'll sort it all out later."

But Mrs. Mildmay would not have it so, not unless Mr. Chess were to carry her bodily from the house. They were still arguing the point when the ape gave an almost human scream of rage and leapt from the chandelier.

Its intention was clearly to land upon Mrs. Mildmay's head, which would certainly have snapped her neck, given the height of the chandelier and the weight of the ape. Fortunately, the constable, who had in the interval snatched a wicked-looking spear from the pile of weapons, cast it

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at the ape, catching it squarely in the chest. The ape screamed again and fell to the marble floor with a terrible thud.

In a moment, Mrs. Mildmay was kneeling beside it, careless of the spreading pool of blood, examining its leathery paws while Mr. Chess wrung his hands and begged her for heaven's sake to come away and leave the filthy thing to the authorities.

"Do be silent, Mr. Chess," said Mrs. Mildmay abstractedly. "I can't find the ring. We must find it — don't you see? — before it does further harm. I made sure it would be upon her finger, but it is not."

As she commenced gently to feel over the inert body, the ape groaned and opened its eyes. Mrs. Mildmay's hand flew to her mouth, and at this last extremity, she was at some trouble to stifle a scream. For the ape's right eye was grey and filled with pain and fear. And the ape's left eye — the ape's left eye was red as fire, smooth and clouded save for a clear star winking and sliding in its depths: the Parwat Ruby.

"Poor Margaret," said Mrs. Mildmay, and plucked the stone from the creature's head. As soon as the ruby was in her hand, the ape was an ape no more, but the corpse of an elderly woman with a spear in her breast.

As to the aftermath of this terrible story, there is little to say. Soon after the appearance of the ape, Mr. Rattler crept out the door to the offices of the sensational paper and thence to the shipping office. Mr. Chess and the constable together searched the house in Grovesnor Place. Of Mr. Ahmed, no trace was found, saving a quantity of bloody water in a copper hip-bath and some well-chewed bones in my lady's bedchamber. In the ruins of Sir Alvord's study, Mr. Chess discovered some papers that suggested that Lady Basingstoke had extracted the codicil from the document-box in Mr. Chess' chambers by means into which he thought it best not to delve too deeply. He thought it likely, also, that Lady Basingstoke had been instrumental in her husband's death, an opinion shared by Mrs. Mildmay and her husband, when she told him the story. Yet all were agreed that Lady Basingstoke, having suffered the most extreme punishment for her crimes, should not go to her grave with the stigma of murder upon her name. There was a brief period when no London jeweler could sell any kind of ruby, even at discounted prices, and no fashionable gathering was complete without a thorough discussion of the curse, its composition, and effect. But then came August and grouse-

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shooting, with house-parties in the country and cubbing to look forward to, and the nine-day's wonder came to an end.

As for the ruby itself, Mrs. Mildmay wore it on her finger. It was perhaps a coincidence that Mr. Mildmay's always lively interest in politics soon became more active, and that he successfully stood for the seat of the borough of Lessingham Parva for the Liberals. After he became Minister of Home Affairs, he introduced and forced through the House the famous Poor Law of 18__, which guaranteed employment to all able-bodied men and women, and a stipend for the old and helpless. In all his efforts, he was ably seconded by his wife, who became in her later years a great political hostess and promoter of young and idealistic Liberal MPs. After her husband's death, at an age when most women are thinking of retiring to the country, Mrs. Caroline Mildmay mounted an expedition to the impenetrable forests of Ceylon, from which journey neither she nor the Parwat Ruby ever returned.

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This story marks James Sarafin's debut in F&SF, *although he has previously published three stories in* Asimov's SF *and a few tales in* Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, *including one piece that won the Robert L. Fish Memorial Award. He lives in Anchorage, Alaska, and clearly knows whereof he speaks with regard to the chilly setting for this tale.*

A Clarity in the Ice

By James Sarafin

THE NIGHT'S RAIN HAD washed the glacier clean, making its face shine a pale but scintillating blue, except where seams of silty gravel ran through it like rock riddling a piece of quartz. Two-hundred-foot cliffs of ice enclosed three sides of a meltwater lake accumulated at one end of a huge bowl in the glacier's surface. In the other direction, southcentral Alaska's Chugach Mountains filled the horizon like the rim of an even huger bowl. Carl Saville stood on the glacier's sun- and rain-roughened surface and waited for the children to finish playing on the ice. Their shrill voices echoed off the lake like inhuman laughter. In rare moments of quiet, Carl could hear the wind moaning through the jagged pinnacles of ice above.

Carl first knew the surge was coming from the little ripples forming around the edge of the lake. His heart pounded in his ears and he tensed his legs to jump as he felt the trembling grow in the ice underfoot. Time enough to shout one quick warning....

"Look out!" The echo came back out of the bowl just as the ice

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groaned, cracked, and heaved. Carl scrambled to keep his feet, his bare hands churning into the hard granular surface. His eyes darted, scanning cracks that might widen into a deep crevasse, like the one that had almost killed him years before. The surge stopped even quicker than it started.

The teacher and fifteen fourth-graders were mostly on all fours, screaming. As Carl stood upright the little girl nearest him burst into tears. His own hands stung from contact with the sharp, cold ice. The kids milled around him as Carl struggled to keep his own fear from showing. He'd better reassure them; if people started thinking the glacier was a dangerous place, he would lose a lot of business.

"Remember how I said the glacier flows like a slow, slow river?" He waited for a few of them to nod before going on. "Sometimes the ice gets caught on the ground, then suddenly comes free, jumps ahead. But it doesn't happen often, and it's over now."

"Isn't it time to go back to the bus?" the teacher said.

Carl's walking tour had brought them a mile out on the glacier, and he started them up a long ravine that was the quickest route out of the bowl. He let the teacher lead them on while he waited for stragglers. The last boy turned to study him. He seemed a bit taller than the others, with light brown hair, cut short but unevenly, and bright blue eyes. Carl recalled that this boy had listened attentively to his glaciology lectures, and realized he was going to ask a question.

"Are you really my grandpa?"

The air around Carl seemed to shimmer, like a wave of cold coming off the wall of ice behind him; he felt light in the head and queasy in his stomach. He hadn't known this was Eric's class, hadn't even recognized him. Carl could only nod. Then he noticed the boy's shoe was untied and went down on one knee.

Just as he finished tying Eric's shoelaces, Carl saw another pair of eyes looking up out of a clear seam of ice below him.

He straightened his back and blinked. The eyes had looked bluer than the glacier ice, which had been crushed dense enough to absorb every other color of the spectrum. They had looked as blue as his own. He could feel the sun's heat on his face and the chill breeze coming off the glacier against his sweat-dampened back. A reflection, he decided, rubbing hard bits of accumulated dust from the corner of his eyes.

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"What's the matter, Grandpa?" Eric asked.

"Nothing," he said. "Your joints get a little stiff when you're my age." Carl knew his grandson saw him as old, with hair and beard mostly gone to gray, face and hands tanned a leathery brown, and eyes creased into a perpetual squint from years spent on the bright, reflective ice.

The boy ran ahead to join his friends, and Carl dropped again to one knee. A thin rivulet of meltwater ran down the ravine and over the clear seam of ice, which was about four feet long, a window into the glacier. Carl used his left hand and forearm to dam the rivulet for a better look. The chill water coursed over his fingers and the slick, deeper cold of the ice made his arm ache at the old break.

The eyes stared back out of an upraised, bearded face. Couldn't be a reflection, not a foot below the surface. There was a man down there, trapped, frozen in the ice.

"Mr. Saville?" The teacher called from up the ravine, uncertain of the path. Carl took one last look into the ice and was up and moving, legs swinging into his hiking stride, up and stepping long over each meltwater pool, to the top of the ravine. He led the class onto a stretch of "black ice," where the glacier was thickly covered with silt and gravel, rolling in gentle hills almost to the parking lot. At one place they had to cross a meltwater stream running high and fast under the long June sun. Carl stopped in midstream to help the children, lifting each in turn across. When Eric's turn came, Carl tried to speak but could find no words; then the boy was gone, running to join his classmates. As he splashed out of the stream, Carl's hands tingled with warmth from holding Eric under the arms.

Carl watched his grandson, kicking up dust with the other boys, and wondered what he was like, really. What was his favorite sport, did he collect baseball cards? What did his face look like when you handed him a present? Was he noticing girls yet?

He'd have to talk to the boy to find out anything. But what could you say to a grandson you didn't even recognize?

It was easier to wonder about the frozen man. The only way a man could get in the ice like that was if he'd fallen into a crevasse, then was covered by water that froze with almost perfect clarity. Carl knew of no one who had disappeared in this vicinity. Unless someone had killed him and hidden the body there.

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Or maybe the man had fallen in when this section of ice had been higher up the valley, thousands of years ago, and been carried along in the glacier's inexorable flow. He recalled news reports of a Neolithic traveler who had been found well-preserved in a glacier, high in the Alps. This must be the same thing; Tanaina and other Indians had once inhabited this area. He should probably call the Anchorage newspaper — the publicity would be good for business.

Vegetation appeared before they left the glacier, a few hardy grasses and weeds actually sprouting in the gravelly soil on top of the ice. They dropped down and went up a dusty trail, through a grove of stunted willows, to the gravel parking lot Carl's bulldozer had carved on the terminal moraine years before.

Most of the children went to the school bus, but Carl noticed Eric heading toward a brown Jeep Wagoneer with rust-rotted fenders and knew he'd missed his chance. Carl's own son, Dan, got out of the Wagoneer to talk briefly to the teacher. Then, without acknowledging his father's presence, Dan drove off with Eric.

Carl waited until the dust had settled from the Wagoneer and bus, then drove his ATV back to the small gift shop and museum in front of the log house where he had lived for many years. The gift shop had a sliding window abutting the road so his single employee could collect the admission fee. Carl didn't own the glacier, but he did own the only road to it. Anyone could look from the distance and higher elevation of the highway, but if they wanted to "WALK ON THE GLACIER," as his highway sign advertised, they had to pay Carl — or those trespassers next door.

Carl stopped the ATV by the window and asked, "Did you collect from the guy in the brown Wagoneer?"

Raymond, a summer college hire who knew few of the locals, replied, "Yeah, sure."

Eric was already in fourth grade, and Carl had been cheated out of any part of the boy's life except for a few brief glimpses through the windows of cars passing on the road. Dan had chosen to live among the trespassers and help them steal his own father's livelihood.

Carl and his wife Rebecca had homesteaded in this valley back in '65, after they noticed all the tourists stopping to photograph the glacier. He

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bulldozed a gravel road downslope from the highway, and by the following summer the Savilles had a log cabin built and their first sign out on the highway.

Then Bill Davison came and figured out that most of Carl's road lay on a section line, which had a public easement reserved by law. He got a court order to use Carl's road and build one of his own on down to the Davison homestead, which also fronted the glacier. And Davison put out his own sign, with a large painting of the blue ice done by his daughter, Clara.

"God put the glacier there," Davison had told him, in their only face-to-face argument. "We've got as much right to homestead and run a business as you."

So Carl lost half of the business he had developed. Tourists only came in the summer, and two families struggled where one would have thrived. For more than a decade, no Davison or Saville said a word to the other. Or so Carl and Rebecca believed, until their son announced that he was marrying Clara.

Carl hadn't spoken to Dan since then, not even at Rebecca's funeral, after the cancer had eaten away her pancreas. Dan had made his choice, to abandon his own family and live with his wife and child on a five-acre parcel split off from the Davison homestead. Carl thought his son would see what kind of people they were when Clara finally left him and Eric for a motorcyclist from L.A. But Dan continued to help manage the Davisons' resort — as if Davison were his father! Davison there with the son and grandson both.

Now Carl saw the way to show them something, the trespasser and the disloyal son. The man in the ice — what a find! He could put out a new sign: "SEE THE ICEMAN — 10,000 YEARS OLD!" The tourists would line up to get in.

Carl grabbed Raymond to help rearrange the museum exhibits. He could put the iceman in his old eight-foot freezer, replacing the lid with a plexiglass skylight. It would be perfect right beside a display case of Tanaina artifacts — stone figurines, antler tools, fur clothing, woven willow baskets — which he had acquired in trade over the years. On a posterboard in the back of the case his late wife's handwriting explained why the Tanaina had avoided the glacier. Legend told of a man who once

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tried to cross the ice to hunt on the other side. The glacier shook in anger, to warn him, but the hunter continued on. He came upon a sheer cliff of ice and was looking for a way up when he found the body of a man who had been killed in a fall. But something was strange — the dead man's clothing and weapons looked just like the hunter's. And when he turned the body over, the face was his own! The hunter fled in terror, back to his village, where his family and friends greeted him with great joy. They said he had been gone a long time, they feared he was dead. When he told his tale, all knew he had traveled into the spirit world.

Carl didn't tell Raymond anything. It might not be legal to display a human body, but if no one knew where it came from the state troopers would probably believe the exhibit was just a tourist rip-off, at least for a season or two. Maybe just long enough to bankrupt Davison.

He drove his old pickup to the highway, then east to a roadside lodge. From the parking lot there the glacier could be seen snaking back thirty miles from his resort, branching into the high peaks which amassed year-round snow from clouds roiling in from the Gulf of Alaska. He knew the geology, from all the years of handling tourists' questions and guiding visiting glaciologists; but still, when he saw the glacier like this, in its entirety, it seemed not to belong in the forested valley, as if it were an intrusion from somewhere else. Seeing it now in the sun, its walls and spires glowing in the green and brown valley, reminded Carl of a picture of a fairy city in a book Rebecca used to read to Dan, of how Carl would come home late from work to find Rebecca reading softly to their son.

He went into the lodge and hired the bar waitress, a part-time artist, to paint the new sign. Back home, he'd barely settled into his chair for the evening when the telephone rang. Ken Janssen, one of the few locals who would talk to him; most resented having to pay, just like the tourists, to use his road to hunt or reach their mining claims. But Ken understood business, and Carl purchased from Ken's general store.

"So what's going on back there, Carl?" Word traveled fast in the valley. "I heard you're putting up a sign with a picture of a caveman in a block of ice."

"Setting up a new exhibit," Carl told him. "The Iceman. Thousands of years old, at least."

"Oh, come on. It's not real, is it?"

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"Why don't you come find out. Should be ready by Friday."

Ken laughed. "You offering discount tickets?"

"Sure, the same discount you give me."

On Thursday, with the freezer ready in the museum, Carl locked up for the evening, loaded some tools on a trailer hooked to his ATV, and drove out across the black ice. When he reached the ravine he noticed the water level in the lake had dropped; the recent shift in the ice must have enlarged the subsurface drainage. With more water now seeping below to make the ground slick, the glacier could well surge again soon. It took only a minute to locate the dark shape of the man frozen in the ice.

Carl began digging with a pick, using a shovel to clear the broken ice out of the hole. He had decided to dig a circular trench around the upright body to avoid damaging it. The resulting ice cylinder could be raised with a hand winch attached to a pole tripod, which he had previously used for lifting moose quarters and car engines. Carl had worked hard with his body all his life and kept at it steadily until the early morning dawn. The air had become cold, and he zipped his jacket tight around his neck, blew on his hands, and continued.

As he chopped and dug Carl could see, in the increasing light, the form of the man locked in the ice cylinder taking shape in the center of the trench. But he couldn't distinguish any features of the man's body or clothing because the pick had gouged and scratched the ice. When the trench reached a depth of six feet, Carl stopped to erect the tripod, fastening the winch cable to three ice screws set into the cylinder. He resumed digging at an angle, below the frozen man's feet, until he could break the cylinder free of the underlying ice. Then he jacked the cylinder up, backed the trailer over the edge of the hole, and tried to lower the cylinder onto the trailer.

It only slid back into the hole. He tried to back the trailer further, but the ATV tires skidded against the weight of the cylinder. He finally had to give up.

The jagged pinnacles of ice beyond the lake cast deep shadows over the bowl, but he could see the first leak of sunlight striking the top of the ridge above the ravine. He climbed the ridge, found a small boulder protruding from the ice, and sat looking down the valley while the sun warmed his back.

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So what was he going to do now? There was no way to load the heavy ice cylinder by himself. He'd have to bring Raymond out here after all, just take the risk of whether he'd keep his mouth shut. He should be showing up at the resort, unlocking the gates pretty soon now. Automatically, Carl checked his bearings by looking toward home — then he rose and looked hard.

Instead of the familiar resort he had built and added to over the years, there stood a much larger, modern hotel, several stories high, with uniform windows and balconies facing the glacier, all the glass reflecting the morning's golden sunlight. Through the glare he made out a tour bus near the front door. And the road and parking lot were not dark simply from the morning shadows — they appeared to be paved with asphalt!

Some kind of mirage. Different densities of air over the glacier, reflecting the image or distorting its direction. But there was no big hotel like that anywhere nearby. He must be so tired he was hallucinating. He stumbled down into the ravine and started the ATV toward home. When he topped a rise he was relieved to see the mirage was gone, that he was heading toward his own familiar resort.

Carl went to bed dead-tired and as he slept he had a dream about something that really happened to him long ago, one late September day. He is walking out on the glacier, using the elevation to scout for moose in the valley, walking on and on. By noon the morning's sun disappears behind dark clouds and snow starts to fall, big, heavy wet flakes that obscure the valley below. He comes to a slight depression running in a long line across the surface. The ice in the depression looks clearer, more granular than elsewhere.

As he crosses the depression, the glacier surges on him for the first time. He feels the quivering underfoot, hears the booming cracks all around, then hears and feels the deep, massive groaning of the ice. Carl sees cracks forming on both sides of the depression, and as he lifts a foot the surface gives way — he drops into a hidden crevasse.

Nothing in his life has ever shocked him so much as this fall into a vertical crack barely wider than his body. His toes and fingernails scrabble futilely on the slick wet ice. He finally smashes to a stop some thirty feet down, where the crack narrows, his rifle slipping from his shoulder and clattering out of sight into the depths of the crevasse.

Carl feels only cold and pain, from the bone protruding out of his left

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forearm and in his chest where he's wedged tight in the crevasse. The close, cold walls of ice still seep water from the morning's sun, sucking out his body heat. Heavy snowflakes sifting down the crevasse obscure even the sky above. Somehow he lifts a leg and right arm, finds purchase to move up, removing the tightness just enough to breathe.

He rests a while, but the pain and cold only grow. He has to climb out. Everything is white and featureless, without depth around him; he only knows up from the direction of waterflow. Bracing his broken arm against his chest, Carl works his way up an inch at a time with his feet, knees, and good arm. A dozen times he almost quits, relaxes, drifts off into the white nothingness.

Here the dream diverges from Carl's reality. In real life he had somehow found a last bit of will to inch on a bit more, crawled out on the surface just above, and staggered home. But Carl's greatest, secret fear was how close that last bit of will had been to not coming. In the dream it doesn't come, and he hangs wedged in the crack, staring up, big wet snowflakes covering his staring eyes....

He was awakened by laughter and voices coming faintly through the museum door. A group of tourists stood around the empty freezer, Ken Janssen among them. Ken had apparently been making jibes at Raymond's expense, but his attention shifted when he saw Carl.

"Don't look now, but your iceman thawed and walked out on you!"

The tourists laughed. Carl had forgotten — he'd asked Raymond to pick up the new sign and put it out on the highway this morning. He tried to pull himself together, to shrug off the chill remainder of his dream.

"Carl," Janssen went on, "you're supposed to be lying down in there! And what happened to your caveman suit?" Carl could tell that behind his smile, Ken was actually mad about paying the toll and finding an empty freezer.

"Sorry, folks," Carl said. "We're still just setting that up, but we'll give you free passes to come back tomorrow." Better than offering refunds.

But now he had no choice but to close up for the day, something he had never done in tourist season. If he didn't get the iceman on display, everyone would be talking about him, calling him an old kook. He shooed the tourists off as gracefully as he could and sent Raymond up to lock the gates.

"You look about due for a vacation," Janssen said, before he left.

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One quick cup of coffee later, Carl was driving toward the glacier with Raymond riding on the trailer. They saw no one all the way to the lake, which had drained further, leaving deposits of silt where the water had receded. The ice cylinder still hung from the tripod, and Raymond needed only one glance inside it.

"Damn! You really did find an iceman!"

Carl felt a moment's relief — he hadn't hallucinated that much, at least. He had Raymond pull on a rope tied to the bottom of the cylinder, while he backed the trailer into it, hoping to tilt the cylinder enough to lay it down on the trailer bed. But the sun must have softened the ice around the screws; the cylinder had only begun to tilt when the screws pulled free, ping ping ping, in rapid but separate reports.

The massive cylinder hit the edge of the trailer hard enough to bounce Carl in his seat, then kicked back and smashed into the ice at the edge of the excavation.

"God damn!" Raymond said. "That sucker almost nailed me!"

The cylinder lay across the hole, cracked all the way through and sagging in the middle. No way to get it on the trailer now, Carl decided. The thing must weigh a ton. He gave Raymond the shovel, he took the pick, and they began breaking the ice carefully away from the body. Carl worked at the foot; he didn't want to risk seeing those eyes that looked so blue under the ice.

The first thing that came free was a pair of leather boots. Modern hiking boots. Couldn't be.

"Uh, Mr. Saville, you should check this out. I don't know who it is, but this guy looks sort of familiar."

Carl needed only a glance at the face Raymond had uncovered to confirm his suspicion: not a Tanaina Indian, but a white man. As they chipped away, not only the boots but the rest of the clothing proved that the man had died within the last few decades. Maybe someone had hidden a body here.

When they finished Carl stood up and finally took a good look at the man's face. Suddenly, his legs wanted to run; he looked wildly around at the ice.

"Who is he?" Raymond asked.

The kid was right, the frozen man did look familiar, like someone Carl

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had seen long ago or in a dream. "I don't know, but we're going to have to call the troopers."

They dragged the body across the hole and lifted it onto the trailer, tying it down with a plastic tarp. The man was frozen stiff and hard, knees slightly bent as if he were crouching when he died, one arm extended and the other clutched to his chest.

"You drive. I'll walk." Carl had that queasy feeling again; he was afraid he might throw up if he tried to ride.

As the ATV disappeared over the top of the ravine the sound of its engine abruptly died. There was no sign of Raymond or the vehicle all the way back to the resort. Not his resort anymore, he saw as he approached, but the big hotel with all the glass. Carl waited for the mirage to vanish each time he dropped out of view, but only saw it grow closer on the next rise. He climbed the moraine and stood looking at the asphalt parking lot. In a little while a shuttle bus came by and stopped. The driver, wearing a red jacket, tie, and name badge, motioned him to get on. Carl found a seat mechanically as the bus started up.

"Sir, you shouldn't be walking out on the glacier without a guide," the driver told him. "People have fallen or disappeared back there."

Carl looked carefully at the features along the road and surrounding mountains. This was his road, by God, which he had cut out of this wild valley two and a half decades ago — except for the paved surface. The driver tried to chat, but Carl remained too stunned to reply. When they reached the glass hotel he knew that ground too, where his resort had been for years. The driver asked him if he needed help and did he have his room key, and Carl shook his head. What was his room number?

"I don't have one."

"I'm sorry, then." The driver's manner grew more abrupt; apparently he acted as a security guard too. "This is a private resort. If you're not a guest of the hotel or with an authorized tour group, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

A tour bus unloaded people at the front door, two bellhops removing bags from the luggage compartment. Carl wanted to look inside the hotel, but the guard was insistent. The guard watched as he walked up the road toward the highway, until he rounded the first bend. Carl had no idea where he was going.

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In half a mile he saw a brown Jeep Wagoneer coming from the highway. It left the asphalt at the curve, staying on the section line road, raising a cloud of dust as it hit gravel. Carl turned to follow before the dust had settled. He had never before set foot or tire here, never looked past the tall spruce trees at the Davisons' property line. Around the first curve he saw the Wagoneer parked in front of a small cabin among the tall spruce. The road should have continued on to the Davisons' lodge, but just past the cabin it had been blocked off with a mound of gravel and was overgrown with weeds and small trees beyond. A black Labrador retriever ran from behind the cabin, barking at his approach. A boy opened the cabin door, called the dog, and came out on the porch.

"Hello, Eric," Carl said.

The boy looked at him while the Lab sniffed his leg.

"Hi." Dan's voice came from the door. "Can I help you?"

"I.... uh...." Carl realized his son did not know him. "I used to live around here, but things seem to have changed."

Dan's manner softened. "Oh, I thought you were from the resort. Would you like to come in, have a cup of coffee?"

Carl saw from the door that the cabin had little more than a living room, kitchen/dining area, and two back bedrooms. He took the cup and a seat at the table across from his son, while Eric hovered nearby. The cabin smelled of coffee, of recently baked cornbread, and faintly of sweat from a pair of work coveralls which had been hung by the back door. Pans and utensils hung on the kitchen walls, and in the living room were tools and a single Machentanz print of a doomed Eskimo hunter sitting, spent, on an ice sheet that had broken free of the mainland. Though tidy, the cabin showed no female presence.

"So, where did you used to live?" Dan asked.

"Up the road a ways." Carl waved vaguely. "I used to know your folks. What happened to the Saville place?"

Dan frowned. "The Japanese bought Mom out six years ago, and my in-laws' place, and a couple others' for good measure. Tried to buy this too. Then they built that glass monstrosity — where it could block our view of the glacier."

Carl could see the big hotel out of the kitchen window through a clearing in the trees.

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"This place is all that's left of the original homesteads in this valley," his son continued. "I never sold out; too many good memories, growing up around here."

"How much land do you own?"

"We've just got the ten acres here, me and Eric. Got it for wedding presents, five from Mom and five from my in-laws."

"Did your wife...does she want to stay here too?"

"She divorced me and moved to L.A. She got our savings, and I got the place. And Eric here — the better of the deal."

Some things hadn't changed at least. Carl came to where the question remaining was the one he had been afraid to ask.

"What about your father? I'm surprised he ever sold out."

"Oh, you don't know about Dad? You must have been here a long time ago. He disappeared, on the glacier we think, back in the fall of '68. Never did find his body. Mom had to struggle to keep the place, but the Davisons — my in-laws — and other neighbors helped us out."

Carl did not respond, trying to throw off the conviction he was dreaming, having one of those dreams where everything was almost like real life, only different in a few awful ways.

His son continued reminiscing. "I was just nine when he disappeared, but I have memories of him that are so strong it's like he's still with me sometimes. I remember how hard he used to work, not getting home until I was in bed, but coming in to talk if I was still awake. I remember him taking me fishing a few times, and once, not long before he died, we hiked up a mountain and found some fossils and rocks. I wish I could remember which mountain it was, 'cause I've always wanted to take Eric there."

"Do you want to see my rock collection?" Eric asked.

"Sure." Carl's mouth had gone dry. He looked in the cup, but he'd drunk all the coffee except for a few brown drops that coated the bottom as he rotated the cup. He could remember those times too, plus the times he had come home too late to speak to his son and just stood for a while watching him sleep. He noticed Dan was looking at him strangely.

"So you've lost both your parents," Carl said, quickly.

"Mom? No, she's still alive. Moved to Anchorage after she sold out. We see her about twice a month."

"But.... I heard she'd died. Of cancer."

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"Nope. Still spry and healthy when I saw her last week."

It all came back to Carl then, Rebecca's dying, too sharp and clear to have been a dream: five months of agony, half the time in the hospital, then home in bed when hope had gone. Hair falling out in thin gray wisps on the pillow. Her face wasting away until nothing but her hard bitter eyes showed above the bed covers. "Why didn't we at least go see our grandson?" she had asked him once, near the end.

And here, wherever he was now, it hadn't happened that way at all.

This had continued too long and consistently real to be a dream; he had actually gone somewhere else, where things were better. Here his Rebecca still lived — no cancer! His son remembered him fondly. And he could talk to his grandson.

Eric came running with a cigar box and dumped his rocks on the table. Dan shook his head and smiled; and Carl suddenly realized, sitting there, that all three of them had the same blue, blue eyes. And knew he did not want to leave this place, even if he lost his own resort. He would tell his son who he was, go find his wife.

"Rebecca," he croaked. "Do you have her phone number?"

His son had been watching him closely. "Well, who did you say you were? No offense, but she and her husband like their privacy, and I don't give out their number to everyone."

"Her husband? You said...he...was dead."

"No, I said my father died years ago. But she re-married about five years later."

The ceramic cup spun out of Carl's hand and broke off its handle on the floor. His Rebecca lived here, in this place, but she belonged to someone else. He couldn't believe it; she had always been so loyal, and he had never thought of remarrying after her death. But of course, she had been a lot younger then. He bent to pick up the cup pieces and mumbled an apology.

"So who did you say you were?" Dan repeated.

And Carl realized he would never be believed, that he wouldn't even know how to explain it. He had to get outside and think.

He stood up. "Just an old friend," he said. "She probably wouldn't even remember me. But I guess it's time to go. Thanks for the coffee."

He left his son and grandson watching him from the front door as he

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went back up the road. There was nothing for him here. Rebecca was lost, as much as in his own world, and his son believed unshakably that he had died long ago. His death must be on record, and he had nothing, not even an identity.

He walked back toward the big hotel, leaving the road for the trees before the last curve, moving through the thinning vegetation, the wild rose, lupine, fireweed, and grasses, until he crossed over the moraine. If he went back to the ravine by the lake, maybe he could return home. Somehow that part of the glacier now existed in both worlds, created in two separate streams that must have diverged twenty-five years ago. Maybe the surge had opened a door, causing the two streams, like braids of the glacier itself, to twist and come back together. Maybe he and the frozen man couldn't exist together in the same world, except there, where the streams converged.

Maybe a man's world was only a possibility, what he created from his own choices and actions. And every time he made a choice, especially a difficult or important one, one that couldn't be unmade, the other possibility and all the consequences flowing from it came into existence somewhere else. But the man couldn't exist in both possibilities — and didn't belong in the one he had rejected.

The lake was almost gone, all drained except for a small pool in the center of a bowl of muck. Raymond stood waiting by the excavation, looking as relieved to see Carl as Carl felt to see him.

"I ran out of gas," Raymond said. "Came back to look for you, and didn't know where you went."

"Where is it?"

"Not far, back there." Raymond pointed up the ravine. "You must have walked right by it."

"I guess we shouldn't have disturbed the body," Carl said. "We'd better put it back where we found it. Go get some gas at the resort and bring it back."

Carl didn't dare leave the ravine again. After Raymond had gone he climbed on the ice ridge. He couldn't see Raymond or the ATV but still saw the big hotel. He went back down and waited. After a long while he heard the ATV coming down the ravine.

He left the tarp around the body as they replaced it in the hole; Carl

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couldn't look at the frozen man again. He wanted to stay with the ATV but didn't feel he could drive, so he rode on the back. They had just started up when he heard the glacier. The glacier groaned deep and low, a sound felt all over the skin as much as heard, like the song of the mother god of whales in the ocean depths, the sound coming out of the crack splitting the floor of the ravine, right between the wheels.

"Get it out of here!" He jumped off and Raymond gunned the ATV, up and out of the ravine, which was opening again into the old crevasse. Carl stumbled and slipped trying to run up the ravine, straddling the widening crack. From behind he heard the tarp sliding against ice, turned, and saw the body disappear into the crevasse.

The ice suddenly groaned louder and the ravine collapsed in a broad line before his feet. Carl jumped.

CARL WALKED UP the winding gravel road from his resort, and turned onto the section line road. Beyond the second bend, in the tall spruce trees where he knew he would find it, he walked steadily toward the cabin he had never seen in this world.

The boy was playing with a dog in the yard and saw Carl approach. He came running up, stopped, and looked with big eyes.

"Hello, Eric."

"Grandpa! What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd come to see if maybe you'd like to go look for fossils up on Shale Mountain."

"Sure!" The boy's face shone with excitement. Then he hesitated and looked at the house. "I need to ask Dad if it's okay." They were both walking toward the cabin. "Do you think he can go too?"

"Yeah. I took your dad fossil hunting up there when he was a kid. I bet he'll remember that."

The boy left him, running ahead. A man couldn't unmake his choices — but he could always make new ones. Carl felt his heart hammering in his throat as he stepped up on the cabin porch. But he didn't turn back.

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Nancy Etchemendy lives in Palo Alto, California, with her family. Where she goes and what she does on nights when the moon is full is not our concern.

Werewife

By Nancy Etchemendy

WONDERING WHY MY IN-LAWS always seem to visit during the full moon, I serve the paté. Am I cursed or merely lucky?

"Oh, thank you, Tatty dear," says Edna, my husband's mother. She loads a cracker and inserts it tidily into her bright mouth. "Oh, my. Are you sure this is vegetarian? It tastes like meat."

Tatty dear? Is she addressing me, Tatiana, the fierce, the wayward? What impertinence is this? I try to raise my eyebrows, but a tiny twitch is all I manage. Inexplicably, I can't find the right muscles. A warm smile startles me, flicking naturally across my face almost as if I have nothing to do with it. I know in times past I've had to force such expressions, but at this moment I can't seem to recall when, or even exactly why. A slight nervous tremor begins in my fingertips.

"Don't worry, Mom. The recipe's straight from the *Vegan Solidarity Cookbook*. Not a hint of animal protein, I promise you," I answer. This is not at all what I intended to say.

Moreover, my voice emerges from my throat sweet and clear, as

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wholesome as homemade butter, flawless as Shasta daisies embroidered on cotton pillow cases, smooth as polished furniture.

Someone in my heart, not Tatty, is growling gleefully, "Of course it tastes like meat. It's loaded with rare liver and other delicious entrails."

That's right, isn't it? How could I have forgotten? I glance through the open doorway at the kitchen counter, surprisingly orderly and clean, arrayed with spotless, sharp knives. I see a bottle of virgin olive oil backlit with late afternoon sun, a hundred walnut shells, broken in pieces — no sign of bloody juice or greasy scraps. I wonder if I am frowning. I feel as if I should be.

"Scrumptious, Miss Tatty," says Jack, my father-in-law. "You know, I'm not exactly a dyed-in-the-wool vegetarian. I keep hoping Mom will fall back into her former evil ways..." and here he winks at Edna, "...but this is damn good. No meat? I've said it before, and I'll say it again. Roger's a lucky man. I think we'll keep you. Great apron, incidentally, darlin'."

I look down at myself. I am wearing a dahlia-print apron with ruffles. How astonishing! I have to dive deep into neglected memories to dredge up the fact that Edna bought this abomination for me at a church bazaar two years ago. I thought I had safely hidden it in the darkest corner of our largest closet. I would rather die than be seen in it, yet here I am, using it to harvest approval from Edna and Jack. Do they have any idea who their son really married?

"Oh," I say, "glad you like it." Tatty, you fool. What on earth are you doing? And Tatty replies, I am leading a normal life, if you don't mind. A normal, happy life!

Happy?

As conspicuous as the apron are my arms, bereft of the bracelets that ought to adorn them, gold and silver, jingling like bells, studded with colorful stones. Who has taken my jewelry away? What is happening here?

I am beginning to feel rather odd.

Our children run into the room. Todd is eleven, and his sister Danielle is eight. They have been outside playing, and are breathless and rosy with exertion. Dark mud smears Todd's T-shirt. Danielle smells sweetly of little girl sweat. What brilliant, lively beings. How I adore them! I want to swoop down on them with kisses and hugs, but my arms are full of crackers and walnut paté and will not do my bidding.

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"I'm starved. What's for dinner, Mom?" says Todd.

I feel the longings of his hungry young body as if they were my own. I know what he needs. Huge hunks of half-cooked beef. Thick giblet gravy on potatoes whipped with heavy cream. Black beer with raw eggs in it. God save us from vegetables.

"Almond lasagna with zucchini in garlic and olive oil," I say in words like little rays of sunshine. "I think you'll like it." I think he'll hate it, but what can I do? His grandmother believes that animal protein is killing her. Who is more important here, an old woman or our children? Of course there are things we can do. We can suggest that Edna go to hell, for example. Tatiana, don't fuck with my life. Tatiana, I'm warning you. Whose life, I am asking? Consider this matter carefully.

I have to shake my head to clear it. Outside, the sun is setting and I feel a frightening, familiar drop in the temperature of my blood. Get away, Tatty. You have no business here.

"Tatty, do you let them run around this way? Filthy and sweaty? Children, we'll be having dinner soon. You're in no condition to sit down at the table with us," says Edna, a glass of white wine halfway to her lips.

How dare she? They are my jubilation! The loves of my existence. Doesn't she understand the profound joy of sweat? After she and Jack made their own son, and she lay dreaming of his tiny fingers and toes already forming in her womb, did she smell like lilies of the valley, or like a woman, satisfied and moist?

My mouth moves. "Grammy's right. Go and clean up. Showers wouldn't hurt." Good mother. Good wife. Poor good Tatty, I murmur inside myself. And in response, like the sudden flash of claws, oh no, I do not want your pity, Tatiana. I am not poor. We are happy, and you will ruin us. If they find out who we really are, they will hate us. For God's sake, hide!

You've got it wrong, Tatty. You are ruining us. All you know how to do is martyr yourself, sacrifice your desires, and the price is always too high.

The children back away, watching me, wide-eyed. They wonder what has become of their mother. Their insight is keen. They sense the disorder of this moment.

I carry the paté into the kitchen. Edna and Jack follow me, perching

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on oak bar stools at the granite-topped island. Everything is unbearably beautiful. The cabinets gleam. The faucets sparkle. Outside, crickets sing in the purple twilight, and a wild green scent issues from the trees. My thighs ache pleasantly. I wish Roger were home. But what would I do if he were? Pull him into the bushes for five minutes of pleasure while his parents look on? Would he think I am crazy? Am I? The questions are moot. There is no time.

The rising moon, a tiny slice of ivory light, appears above the eastern hills. During the next few moments, it will swell into a powerful, bulging ellipse. The hair along my spine stands erect, tickling, as if insects dance on my skin.

I slice zucchini and garlic into a pan of hot oil. A delicious fragrance rises up from it. No, I'm mistaken. I don't care for zucchini. I don't care for it at all. Faint perspiration cools my upper lip. My deodorant seems to have stopped working, and something strange is happening to my scalp. Don't do this, I'm begging you. Look around at what we've got. You'll destroy it all. I'm no longer sure who's talking.

I try with all my might to retreat from the stove, to grimace, but I can't. Concerted howls strangle and lie stillborn in my throat as the moon rises. Everything inside me rearranges itself; I can hear the creaks and groans, feel the movement of muscle and even bone. The force of the heavens is irresistible. The baby powder fragrance of deodorant returns in a powerful tide.

"When will Roger be getting home? Shouldn't he be here by now?" says Edna.

"Don't fret yourself, honey," says Jack.

"That's right, Mom. He'll be walking in the door any minute now. It'll be perfect timing. You wait and see. I have an instinct for these things."

Indeed I do.

Turning the zucchini with a spatula, I hum a few bars of "Shine On Harvest Moon." Ivory light drifts through the kitchen window. Victory is mine. The transformation is complete. I chatter innocently and without concern, Tatty dear, the perfect wife, perfectly in control, at least on this night of the month.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

THE LONG FUTURE

If we are to survive through a long future, we must stay in contact with our long past.

—Freeman Dyson

FREEMAN Dyson is our foremost gazer into the future, and he likes to look long.

In his *Imagined Worlds* (1997) he uses Shakespeare's seven ages of man from *As You Like It* to outline a grand perspective of our possible futures. He sets the seven ages as "...not the seven parts of an individual life but the different timescales on which our species has adapted to the demands of nature."

These scales are handily written in powers of ten: 10x, where x runs from one to seven. At the upper end, ten million years, the major primates evolved.

Similarly, the best any deep time message across epochs can envision is communication to the last members of our species. This takes us to the scale of x between 6 and 7, when evolution may well find a different shape and portent for intelligence. For messages to survive beyond a million years demands that we place them beyond the reach of human intrusions and the rub of wind and water. This means launching them into the preserving vacuum of deep space.

Contemplating a message that could well outlast humanity itself is sobering, frustrating and exalting. On shorter scales there remain enormous difficulties. Our complexity as a thinking species arises in part from the inherent conflict between the contradictory demands of these time scales. We are geared to think on the scale of x=1, a decade. Beyond that lies a full century, x=2, the boundary of

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posterity. How to balance these?

In the future our crucial option will be whether we use our resources to continue our present, historically extraordinary two percent growth rate per year. There is no inherent physical reason not to expect that we will. Ambition is eternal. But to do so will enmesh us in severe crises of overpopulation and resource depletion. What sorts of "messages" can we transmit to our distant descendants in the language of the planet itself — in biological and environmental information?

The future comes in all time scales, yet the cares of the day always win out over those of eternity. For example, in our unique age, growth dominates. Our population, economic resources, and sheer space packed with humans are all increasing by about two percent a year. Such population growth must end within a century, plausibly topping out at around ten billion souls.

Rather than struggles for land or riches, as in antiquity, Dyson argues that "The most serious conflicts of the next thousand years will probably be biological battles." The human heritage itself could become the crucial issue. Yet in a way this is an optimistic view, for the next few centuries promise to strain the entire human prospect in unprecedented ways. Land and riches may still be the major driver in human affairs.

Here knowledge of and intuitions about deep time can be of help, perhaps crucially. Our modern sense of time's shadowy immensities should inform our own sense of our problems. Past methods of communicating across the ages had foibles and fatal delusions; ours do too, as I've described.

We should learn from these. Knowledge of history's panorama can aid our judgments today. Change accelerates all around us. We dwell in a unique epoch, hurtling downstream, borne by currents we can only weakly control. Only by sensing our place in the flow of time can we navigate the rapids ahead.

If we are not constrained to Earth's surface beyond the next century, our two percent growth rate per year would yield in a millennium a half-billion-fold increase in all these numbers. A message from the far past would be swallowed by such profusion, unless very carefully aimed at an audience that could not miss it. We have the examples of the pyramids and Stonehenge for strategies to achieve this: at a minimum, be big, solid, heavy, and hard to remove.

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While our age offers harder materials and new locales, even the sanctuary of deep space may not remain distant in centuries to come. The uncountable numbers of lost messages should warn us that while our yearning for eternity will presumably persist, the attempt is not easy, and never certain.

How to penetrate such formidable barriers?

I asked a computer-whiz friend how he thought we could leave messages to the far future and he had a quick answer: "Scatter CD-ROM disks around. People will pick them up, wonder what they say, read them — there you go."

After I stopped laughing, he said in a puzzled, offended tone, "Hey, it'll work. Digitizing is the wave of the future."

Actually, it's the wave of the present. This encounter was echoed by some of the Marker Panels members, making me think again of our present fascination with speed and compression as the paradigms of communication. (The nuclear waste burial site in New Mexico had assembled a Markers Panel to design monuments that could carry warnings of danger for ten thousand years. I served on the scenario-writing portion of the effort.) I imagined my own works, stored in some library vault for future scholars (if there are any) who care about such ephemera of the Late TwenCen. A rumpled professor drags a cardboard box out of a dusty basement, and uncovers my collective works: hundreds of 3.5 inch floppy disks, ready to run on a DOS machine using WordPerfect 6.0.

Where does he go to get such a machine in 2094? Find such software? And if he carries the disks past some magnetic scanner while searching for these ancient artifacts, what happens to the carefully polished prose digitized on those magnetic grains?

Ever since the Sumerians, we have gone for the flimsy, fast, and futuristic in communications; our fascination with the digital is only the latest manifestation. To the Sumerians, giving up clay tablets for ephemeral paper — with its easily smudged marks, its vulnerability to fire and water and to recycling as a toilet aid — would have seemed loony.

Yet paper prevailed over clay; while Moses wrote the commandments on stone, we get them on paper. Paper and now computers make information cheaper to buy, store, and transmit. Acid-free paper lasts about five hundred years, but

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CD-ROMs' laser-readable 0s and 1s peel away from their substrate within decades.

Music is probably the deepest method of communication across cultures. It speaks to our neural wiring, exciting pulses and rhythms that fit our mental architecture. The music of hunter-gatherer drums and pipes can instill in us feelings difficult to name but impossible to miss.

Until a few centuries ago, there was no method of preserving this most airy of communications. We do not know what tunes excited ancient Rome, though we have their instruments. Our modern sound recording promises new dimensions in directing durable meanings. Except for the *Voyager* disk, which sent songs, symphonies and shouts to the stars, this is a neglected theme in most deep time schemes; perhaps, given the speed of technological change, music is a more appropriate medium for the shorter scale of time capsules.

Still, music brings up a larger question: the mutability of all transcription, whether of the written or spoken word, or of song.

Consider the Babylonian cuneiform tablet. Many thousands of these clay bricks have come down to us, dried or fired, stamped with wedge-shaped pictographs. They are truly dead media, from the stylus to the language (Babylonian), to the very alphabet used. Only a few hundred scholars can read them. To a lesser extent, this also applies to a papyrus scroll and a Latin incunabula on medieval theology. Already, manuals for the Osborne computer have joined this company. Media and their messages fade from our world, sometimes with astonishing speed.

A desire for truly hard copy, preferably in stone, stems from its durability. Our modern digital libraries are more vulnerable than monastic scrolls were to a barbarian's torch; one power surge and all is lost.

Worse, nothing dates more quickly than computer equipment. Already historians cannot easily decipher the punch-card and tape technology of 1960s computers, and the output of early machines such as Univac are unintelligible.

Still, the future of long-term storage seems to belong to electronic media. The U.S. National Archives house about 6 billion documents, 7 million pictures, 120,000 movie reels and 200,000 recordings. The 165-acre Library of Congress, the world's largest library, houses about 120 million items and is

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adding about 5 million per year. But even acid-free paper is good for at most several centuries, and few books are so well published today. (Indeed, the magazine you are reading will probably last only a few decades at best.)

Recordings fade, film dissolves, even museum-quality photos pale. People who work with these perishable mountains of yellowing print see electronic media such as CD-ROMs as their future. Even the Vatican's library, half a millennium old, is going digital.

In principle, digital is forever because it is easy to renew. Making exact copies is simple and costs much less than any other medium. But so far the burgeoning industry has not made a medium that can persist physically. Magnetic tape lasts a few years, videotape and magnetic disks at most a decade, and optical disks perhaps thirty years. So far, digital lasts forever — or five years, whichever comes first.

Even if durable, digital media have an innate translation problem old-fashioned print does not. A document's meaning dissolves into a bit-stream of electronic zeroes and ones, meaningful only to the software that made it. Stored bits can represent text, a pixel dot in an image, an audio symbol, a number. There is no way to know which, or how to retrieve it, except by reading it with the proper software and hardware.

In just the last two decades, we have seen the quick-step march of mainframe computers, mini-computers, networks and soon, optical methods. Punch cards, computer tape, magnetic floppy disks, hard disks, optical storage — what can a reader a century hence make of these? Future "cybraries" will have to contend with knowledge entombed in eight-track magnetic tapes, computer tape cartridges, analog videodiscs and compact disks, plus much to come. Even when translated to new media and software, material filtering through a new format is often distorted.

Imagine how the *Iliad* would read if the only existing text of the 2,400-year-old epic had been translated into every intermediate language between ancient Greek and modern English. How much of Homer's poetry and presence would survive? The multi-filtered text would be recognizable, but its essence, the spark and style and flavor of Homer, would be lost. Indeed, one might mistake it for a dry, long-winded history instead of a work of literature.

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All this suggests that our recent passion for the digital is probably a passing fervor. Until it firms up into a standard method, transparent to many as text is today, with equipment that promises to survive a few human lifetimes, it seems an unpromising way to consign one's vital messages to the abyss of centuries.

Eventually, neither paper and CD-ROMs, nor any foreseeable computer-based method, are for eternity. Even tombstones blur, and languages themselves are mortal. How to talk across the ages, to call out a warning? How to get their attention, even? We have to learn to write largely, clearly, permanently. And largely may be most important of all, for the crowded human future may well drown out all but the most obvious voices, whispering of the distant past.

More deeply, how do we induce respect for whatever warnings we leave? Nobody will revere small, digital records, so the messages should be associated with larger, striking monuments. The Marker Panels seemed to me to want a very special response: not the grudging respect accorded an ancient threat, but a reflective consideration. Buildings of religious, emotional, or memorial impact tend to fare well. Cemeteries, for example, can hold their own against urban encroachment.

One of the striking images as one approaches Manhattan from LaGuardia airport is the broad burial grounds, still there after centuries despite being near some of the world's most valuable real estate. In Asia and Europe, temples and churches survive better than the vast stacks of stones erected to sing the praises of more worldly powers.

Of course, often they were better built, but also communities are hesitant about knocking them down. New religions often simply adopt the old sites. The Parthenon survived first as a temple to Athena, then as a Byzantine church, later a mosque, and now it stands as a hallowed monument to the grandeur of the vanished Greeks who made it.

Sometimes conquest destroys even holy places, as when the Romans in 70 A.D. erased the Temple of Solomon. Perhaps some conqueror thousands of years from now will pass by nuclear waste site warning monoliths. Seeing them as tributes to a society now vanquished, he might order them all knocked over, buried, their messages defaced.

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Comparable events happened many times over as the Europeans moved across the planet a few hundred years ago, rubbing out the religious and literary past of whole peoples. The Mayans wrote on both paper and clay, but nearly all of their work is gone.

In this perspective, digital storage has a trump: make many copies, so even fanatics of the future cannot find them all. Scatter them. Leave the translating to an ingenious future, as all antiquity did. But will they?

In 1862 Victor Hugo had just published *Les Miserables* and while on holiday wanted to know how it was selling. He sent his publisher a note consisting of a single punctuation mark: ? Not to be outdone, the publisher replied with !. This was the shortest correspondence in history, and it is difficult to see how it could be equaled.

This worked because both sides knew from context enough to deduce much meaning from a single sign. Author Tor Norretranders calls this phenomenon exformation: content discarded but referred to by background and circumstances. Exformation can greatly compact messages. Alas, most contexts are present-saturated and quickly pass from the obvious to the unknowable. Who remembers the origin of "23-skiddoo," a "hep" expression of seventy-five years ago?

The Hugo-publisher correspondence avoided the perils of slang by using only punctuation. Still, it will mean nothing once English has altered or vanished, so that ? and ! signify nothing except to scholars.

Exformation-rich messages have depth in the sense that they call forth much with few symbols. The more exformation shared by sender and receiver, the more compact a communication can be. The ultimate form is exformation carried by nothing, no information at all. Suppose I agree with you that I won't call by telephone tomorrow if everything is going according to some plan we have. If you hear nothing, you know you've learned something, with no signal passing between us. (Unless the telephones don't work, so I can deduce nothing.) Effortlessly, we have achieved the supreme compaction of communication.

Between friends this is simple, but alas, between distant eras and cultures it is nearly impossible. The only reliable exformation is that which we share as primates and humans: our way of filtering the

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world and our innate reactions to it.

What shall I build or write
Against the fall of night?
—A.E. Housman

A visit to a Pleistocene cave in southern France reveals the past in subtle ways. Paintings on the cave walls and ceiling show a pack of wild horses galloping along a ledge, while vivid antlered reindeer leap toward the viewer from nearby walls. Bison scratched into stone show fine-line features of nostrils, eyes and hair. Big-bellied horses lope toward us on short legs.

These are not crude sketches. A big rocky bulge forms the muscular shoulder of a bison. A cow's body follows quite naturally a long, deep depression in one wall. Cleverly drawn animals blend, sharing a natural line in the wall. A ceiling frieze of small reindeer seem simply rendered under a flashlight's direct beam, but when the light angles away, the racks of their antlers follow the crests of slightly raised ridges in the rock.

Some prehistoric master saw the essence of these animals embedded in the chance curves of the cave. Then he called them forth to the eye, using negative space in ways we do not witness again until the work of the sixteenth century.

These signals across tens of millennia carry a heady sense of graceful intelligence. We know well enough what animals lived then, but only in such paintings can we delve into the cerebral wealth of our ancestors. Whether the artist intended them as such, these paintings then are the best sort of deep time messages, conveying wordless mastery and penetrating sensitivity across myriad millennia and staggeringly different cultures.

It is sobering to contemplate that our distant heirs may know us best not by our Michelangelos or Einsteins or Shakespeares, but by our waste markers, our messages aboard spacecraft, our signatures upon the soil and species, or our effect upon their landscape.

Yet that is a proposition we must entertain. The longest lived markers may be the damage we leave.

Only by trying varying perspectives can we hope to grasp how our culture may someday look to others vastly different, and perhaps better experienced.

Our time can benefit from the vistas made possible by science. When hatred and technology can

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slaughter millions in months, such terrors deprive life of that quality made scarce and most precious to the modern mind: meaning. Deep time in its panoramas redeems this lack, rendering the human prospect large and portentous again. We gain stature alongside such enormities.

Though I deplore the Kilroy Was Here impulse to mark the future with our scrawls, I realize that Kilroy's followers were expressing strongly felt emotions. Their gestures against the inevitable are merely futile, conveying little. Our names are surely the least aspect of our selves.

Considering our position in the long roll of epochs demands breadth transcending the momentary and the passingly personal. To reverse a famous saying of Newton's, I would hope that our grandchildren can fondly say of us, that if they have seen farther than our generation, it will be because they are standing taller.

Seeing farther goes with the territory of both science and science fiction.

Certain professions lend their followers an intuitive grasp of long duration. Archaeologists sense the rise and fall of civilizations by sifting through debris. They are intimately aware of how past societies mismanaged their surroundings and plunged down the slope of collapse, sometimes with startling speed.

Biologists track the extinction of whole genera, and in the random progressions of evolution feel the pace of change that looks beyond the level of mere species such as ours. Darwinism invokes cumulative changes that can act quickly on insects, while mammals take millions of decades to alter. Our own evolution has tuned our sense of probabilities to work within a narrow lifetime, blinding us to the slow sway of long biological time. This may well be why the theory of evolution came so recently; it conjures up spans beyond our intuition. On the creative scale of the great, slow, and blunt Darwinnowings such as we see in the fossil record, no human monument can sustain. But our neophyte species can now bring extinction to many, and that is forever.

In their careers, astronomers discern the grand gyre of worlds. But planning, building, flying, and analyzing one mission to the outer solar system commands the better part of a professional life. Future technologies beyond the chemical rocket may change this, but there

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are vaster spaces beckoning beyond which can still consume a career. A mission scientist invests the kernel of his most productive life in a single gesture toward the infinite.

Those who study stars blithely discuss stellar lifetimes encompassing billions of years. In measuring the phases of stellar mortality they employ the many examples, young and old, that hang in the sky. We see suns in snapshot, a tiny sliver of their grand and gravid lives caught in our telescopes. Cosmologists peer at distant reddened galaxies and see them as they were before Earth existed. Observers measure the microwave emission that is relic radiation from the earliest detectable signal of the universe's hot birth. Studying this energetic emergence of all that we can know surely imbues (and perhaps afflicts) astronomers with a perception of how like mayflies we are.

No human enterprise can stand well in the glare of such wild perspectives. Perhaps this is why for some, science comes freighted with coldness, a foreboding implication that we are truly tiny and insignificant on the scale of such eternities. Yet as a species we are young, and promise much. We may come to be true denizens of deep time.

Though our destiny is forever unclear, surely if we persist for another millennium or two, we shall fracture into several species, as our grasp on our own genome tightens. We will dwell on the scale of a hastening evolution, then, seizing natural mechanisms and turning them to our own tasks. In this sense we will emerge as players in the drama of natural selection, as scriptwriters.

Our ancient migrations across Earth's surfaces have shaped us into "races" which cause no end of cultural trouble, and yet are trivial outcomes of local selection. Expansion into our solar system would exert selective pressure upon traits we can scarcely imagine now, adaptations to weightlessness, or lesser gravity, or other ranges of pressure or temperature. In this context, we will need long memories of what we have been, to keep a bedrock of certainty about what it means to be human. This is the work of deep time messages as well.

The larger astronomical scale too will beckon before us in such a distant era, for well within a millennium we will be able to launch probes to other stars. To ascend the steps of advanced engineering and enter upon the interstellar stage will portend much, introducing

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human values and perceptions into the theater of suns and solar systems. The essential dilemma of being human — the contrast between the stellar near-immortalities we see in our night sky, and our own all-too-soon, solitary extinctions — will be even more dramatically the stuff of everyday experience.

What changes might this presage? We could lend furious energies to the pursuit of immortality, or something approximating it. If today we eliminated all disease and degeneration, accidents alone would kill us within about 1500 years. Knowing this, would people who enjoyed such lifetimes nonetheless strive for risk-free worlds, hoping still to escape the shadow of time's erosions?

On the scale of millennia, threats and prospects alter vastly. Over a few thousand years, the odds are considerable that a large asteroid or comet will strike the Earth, obliterating civilization if not humanity. But within the next century, as our ability to survey the solar system and intervene there grows to maturity, we will be able to protect our planet (or even others) from such risks.

This marriage of space science and planetary protection will seem inevitable by then, for it shall occur in the same era that we learn, perhaps by rudely administered punishments, to be true stewards of the planet. The impulse to do so will spring from a similar sense of the perspectives afforded, if we heed, by pondering deep time. A steward must look long.

We are ever restless, we hominids. It is difficult to see what would finally still our ambitions — neither the stars, nor our individual deaths, would ultimately form a lasting barrier. The impulse to push further, to live longer, to journey farther — and to leave messages for those who follow us, when we inevitably falter and fall — these will perhaps be our most enduring features.

Still, we know that all our gestures at immortality —as individuals or even as a lordly species — shall persist at best for centuries or, with luck, a few millennia. Ultimately they shall fail.

Intelligence may even last to see the guttering out of the last smoldering red suns, many tens of billions of years hence. It may find a way to huddle closer to the dwindling sources of warmth in a universe that now seems to be ever-expanding, and cooling as it goes. Whether intelligence can persist

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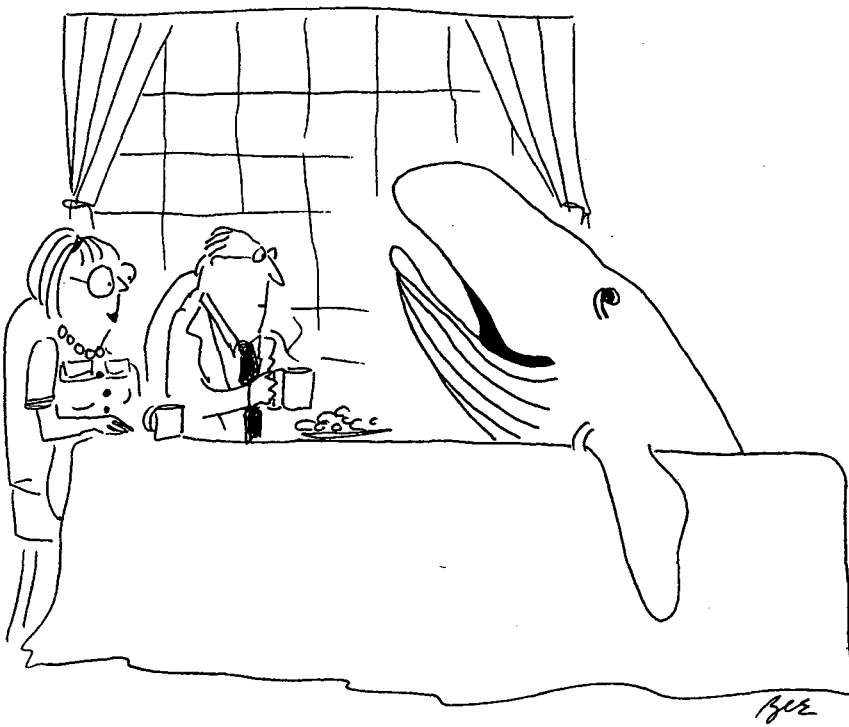
against this final challenge, fighting the ebb tide of creeping entropy, we do not know.

But humans will have vanished long before such a distant waning. That is our tragedy. Knowing this, still we try, in our long twilight struggles against the fall of night. That is our peculiar glory.

* * *

Portions of this column appear also in Dr. Benford's new book, *Deep Time*. Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. Email: gbenford@uci.edu



"I know you adopted me, but who were my biological parents?"

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Jan Lars Jensen's first appearance in our pages was last August, when we ran his World War II story "The Pacific Front." He works by day as a librarian in Chilliwack, British Columbia, and he is celebrating his thirtieth birthday this year. He is also celebrating the publication of his first novel, Shiva 3000, *which is due to come off the presses any day now.*

If his previous publications haven't already done so, this inventive and heartfelt new story should mark him clearly as one of the most promising new writers in the field.

The Secret History of the Ornithopter

By Jan Lars Jensen

1899

LITTLE REGGIE TODDLED over lawns of the Frost estate with his nanny traipsing along, blowing bubbles. She'd been given the double charge of laundering clothes and keeping mind of the boy, while her master attended important business, not to be disturbed, many important gentlemen, the advancement of science, the glory of Britannia and preservation of her Majesty's military supremacy. The nanny had bored of washing clothes. She drifted from her chore, ostensibly to give Reggie a breath of fresh air. With a scoop of soapwater she blew bubbles for him to chase, and she blew them toward the gentlemen's racket.

And what a sight for them both having crested a knoll, cultured greens of grass interrupted by verticals of gentlemen in suits, her master Edward Frost included, all of them standing in calm observance, multiplying the verticals of trees, elms, asps, cedar, and the immense oak where attention was concentrated. And what an age we were entering, what a time, when

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adults could be stopped in their steps, startled by visions as dreamlike as a child's, as the nanny stopped now, her lips pursed to blow a bubble.

A steam engine clamored on the lawn, pitmans rising from its back to a second contraption suspended from the oak, a machine that extended great black wings, great flapping black wings, feathered like a bird's but of a span and girth that bespoke the size of the dreams of the men who'd made them — yes, *made* them, because even a girl like her with no education to speak of could see that the beating of the wings depended on the steam-driven strokes from below.

The core of a great mechanical bird? Was that what they had built? Was she dreaming?

Little Reggie swayed, unsteady, staring at the contraption, close enough to feel the air rolling from its efforts.

And the gentlemen in suits, they stared at the winged mechanism, withholding comment.

Everyone was dreaming. It was an age of dreams, and for Reggie's father Edward, possibly an age of dreams come true.

1902

Man was meant to fly: that much the Royal Aeronautical Society agreed upon. The issue of debate was simply, by what means?

Opinion shifted with the performance of prototypes built in England and on the continent, but lately the RAS had leaned toward the idea of a fixed-wing flier. Sir George Cayley began and ended his pioneering career in the study of flight with the concept of a craft bearing fixed wings, its propulsive force coming from a separate source: this was called an *aeroplane,* and impressive results by fixed-wing gliders had recently swayed RAS members toward such designs.

But Edward Frost knew better.

Man was meant to fly, yes. But would man be so foolish as to ignore the example God had given him? Birds, beautiful birds — the Society should follow their splendid example, Edward knew, and build an *ornithopter,* with propulsion deriving from the wings. He spent much time watching birds in flight but lately he'd been going to the window also for solace.

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"Edward?"

"Yes of course, cherie."

"I haven't asked you anything yet."

"No, cherie, of course you haven't."

"The iceman gave me a vulgar look this morning."

"I'll have a word with him."

"He left his boots on when he came inside the house. He didn't make an effort, even, to first clean off the mud."

"The cur. I'll give him a good talking to."

"I was very shocked, Edward. I stood with my jaw dropped and I glared at him. And do you know? He looked right back at me! He gave me an immodest look."

"He forgot his place. You poor dear."

"Why would he behave this way, Edward? Why would he look at me this way?"

"The cur. A good talking-to. I'll set him straight tomorrow."

"But what has come over an iceman, to behave in such a way? Why did he give me such a look?"

"Because you're French, cherie. He thinks he can take liberties with a French woman."

"Oh. Oh."

Chantel looked down; she smoothed the pages of Aesop's Fables, which she'd been reading to Reggie. Edward hoped she could not see him flush in the window's reflection. A lie was acceptable if it should spare someone's feelings, but he had chosen his lie badly, insulting her heritage, and he could only justify doing so with the knowledge he was protecting her from much larger pains, real threats, griefs more tangible than the impudent glances of servicemen.

"Reggie," Edward said. "Come stand with your father."

The boy arched his back to pour himself from his mother's lap. Reggie stood only as tall as the window sill, and so Edward scooped him up and stood him on the table, giving the boy a clear view of the sky and shapes swooping against twilight purple. The boy lifted his hand to point at them, their flight bringing a smile to his face.

"Yes," Edward said quietly. "Birds. And nobody questions their wealth, do they? No sum of money could rival the gift of flight."

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1903

Members of the Royal Aeronautical Society had returned to the Frost estate. They stood on the hillside with their arms behind their backs, watching without comment.

Down the slope ran a set of tracks like those crisscrossing the nation, although it was no locomotive waiting to hurtle down their length. On the hilltop sat a more fanciful machine, Ornithopter Number Three, the product of heavy mental, physical, and financial investment, the fulcrum upon which these very grounds had been leveraged, the culmination of years of work and countless dreams of escaping Earthly encumbrances. And to think it could all be delayed by one reluctant driver! Edward tried to keep a level tone as he prevailed upon the man sitting in the Ornithopter's chair.

"Harry, be reasonable."

"But sir — "

"Really, Harry, I must insist."

"Sir, you pay me to drive horses, not flying machines!"

"We've discussed your qualifications, Harry. You need do nothing more than sit in that sling and provide ballast; I think that's within your capabilities. Let's not keep the good people waiting any longer, shall we?"

Harry peered past his employer's shoulder at the distinguished guests standing over the hillside, some knighted, one a Windsor. He swallowed. He nodded. Mister Frost was right. The event was bigger than his misgivings, and Harry couldn't bear the thought of keeping distinguished men waiting for his cowardice. Edward leaned over and fastened the canvas belt across Harry's waist.

Ornithopter Three was a vision — enough to stifle even the most vocal skeptics, if only briefly. The chassis was a simple upright framework of tubes on wheels which would follow the track down the slope. Behind the nervous driver, the frame supported its motive faculty, a gunpowder engine based on the model by Trouvé, but even this was not the craft's most impressive aspect.

The wings spanned almost twenty feet and looked like something borne of mythology. Frost and sympathetic members of the Society had spent countless hours attaching duck feathers to the cambered frames, which were hinged in the middle and connected to the engine by coiled

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Bourdon tubes. The engine fired blank gun cartridges against the tubes, hyper-extending them, and so causing the wings to flap downward. After this brief explosion, the tubes would relax enough to bring the wings up again, as the next cartridge fell into place. Frost distributed wads of cotton batting to his assistants and Harry, who reluctantly stuffed his ears, then returned to gripping the frame like a prisoner.

The assistants removed and folded their jackets. Edward retreated to a good vantage. He'd planned to make notes on the Ornithopter's performance but realized a full sentence would be unnecessary, because this day would be summarized with a single word.

Success or failure.

He signaled the assistants.

They started pushing the Ornithopter down the tracks, for an initial burst of speed. When they had covered a third the distance, one of them triggered the engine: it erupted with a gatling-gun racket, and Harry jumped at the noise. But attention drew quickly to the wings, the great wings, working as they had been designed to work, pumping up and down, spreading breadth against the invisible ocean of air, flapping, flapping, flapping —

The men pushed Ornithopter Three until it got out of their grasp, pulling ahead of them, and Edward Frost could see his machine fight gravity, battling for buoyancy, struggling to rise. Further encouragement awaited at the terminus of the tracks, a ramp that would shoot the craft skyward. Gulls had been wheeling about earlier and Edward's mind sprang on a tangent, wondering if the Ornithopter would burst through their number, surprising them....

The craft shot off the ramp, but surprised no birds.

The great wings continued pumping but the Ornithopter did not ascend beyond a mere inertial arc, hitting the ground, hard, lifting again briefly, not flying but bouncing, at best leaping, a sort of industrial hopping, punctuated madly across many yards. Men scattered. Edward felt himself dropping even though he remained standing. His pencil and ledger became heavy, too heavy, subject to an unfair share of gravity, as he watched his great design flounder, and it did resemble a bird, but a bird attempting to toss debris off its talons, or perhaps kill prey in an unconventional smashing manner.

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The assistants found their jackets. Other finely dressed observers did not react outwardly, they remained fixed in place, as if this scene was fully expected; they put forward no dismay or disappointment or smug pleasure, because they were too embarrassed or too courteous or too aloof for such comments. What they watched — still firing gunpowder in staccato snorts — was the failure of Edward Purkis Frost. The ruin. Not all the men gathered on the slopes were students of aeronautics. Some were bankers. Money lenders. Men with a financial stake in the day's results.

Other men, too. Uninvited. They kept back from the crowd so as not to draw attention. Unknown to Edward, these strangers also would influence his future, but for now they stood silent, while Ornithopter Three bounced over the grounds, shedding feathers, making a gaudy show of Edward's downfall, while Harry, still strapped aboard, fought to shout out,

"Sir...I...respectfully...resign...my...services!"

Months passed.

The image of Ornithopter Three hopping to its demise tainted Edward's world-view, not least of all his feelings toward birds. He stood at the drawing room window and shuddered at the sight of a pigeon flying to the coop.

He trudged through the snow and found the landed pigeon strutting back and forth. Edward reached inside and untied the small piece of paper rolled around its leg. The note was from London, from his friend Arthur Hoyt. No good news had arrived recently and the spare paragraph written here was perhaps the worst yet.

> Americans report 12-second flight. First in history in which machine carries a man and is raised by its own power into the air — no reduction of speed, landed at a point as high as that from which it started. Wilbur and Orville Wright, Flyer No. 1. Fixed wing.

Fixed wing.

The size of the note allowed for no more details. But this was enough. Fixed-wing fliers had triumphed. The Ornithopter, Edward realized,

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would amount to nothing more than a footnote in the history of aviation, an entry small enough to fit around a pigeon's leg.

1906

Edward developed a near-phobia of pigeons. A pigeon returned to his coop, and he learned he'd lost his position as President of the Society. A pigeon, and he was warned of legal maneuvers by creditors. A pigeon, and the Crown relieved him of his position as magistrate.

How could his situation be worse? He lacked the imagination.

Then, one October afternoon, two strangers came to the estate, and Edward took the timing of their arrival as bad portent.

It was the same afternoon bailiffs came to seize assets, a burly pair of dullards lugging the wing of an ornithopter to their wagon; watching the wing go, Edward noticed the coach pull up, and two men disembark. Unlike the bailiffs, these men were slight, even timid, their heads downturned, apparently embarrassed by the scene in the middle of which they found themselves. They wore English suits and these seemed awkward on the strangers because, Edward realized, they were Oriental.

Perplexed, he crossed the lawn to meet them, expecting bows, but the Orientals extended their hands simultaneously.

"Very pleased to meet your acquaintance, Mister Edward Frost." Their names were Toru and Hiroto, but if these were too challenging Edward was welcome to call them Tommy and Henry. Edward could not differentiate them beyond the color of their suits and the fact one thrust out his chest when he spoke. "We are very large enthusiasts of your work, on behalf of our master and employer, Okura Shuko Kan."

"My work?"

"Ornithopters. Our master, very interested in your success."

"News of my 'success' seems to have been skewed in translation."

The two men blushed. "We were attending, for the test flight."

"You were here? You witnessed the fiasco?"

"We suggest, Edward Frost, this was not fiasco, to us."

Edward could no longer withhold the question. "Why are you here?"

"Our master, Okura Shuko Kan, he very interested in machine-powered flight. In replicating the flight of birds."

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"You'll pardon me for smiling but I don't think any Chinaman will have better luck than I. Your race lags too far behind in technology and industry, I'm afraid, to achieve powered flight."

The pair colored, paused before speaking again. "Sir, we are Japanese."

"Japanese, Chinese — it doesn't change my point, does it? You haven't the grasp of modern sciences. I might do your master a favor and recommend he avoid the expense and humiliation I have suffered for my ambition. Good day, sirs, you've added an amusing note to a rather dreary day."

Edward offered his hand. One of the men stuck out his chest, said, "Tsar Nicholas would disagree, I think."

"Tsar Nicholas?"

"He would disagree I think about the Japanese lagging. In industry. In technology."

A sound point. Schools of fish no doubt circulated through the Russian fleet right now, somewhere along the sea floor. The Japs had won the Russo-Japanese War decisively, and Edward found himself reconsidering the pair who stood before him. It was "Tommy" who had spoken out, demonstrated some backbone after all that blushing and deference. Edward gave them a second look, and noted that however out-of-place their suits looked on such slight frames, they were nonetheless exquisite, purchased from a Hyde street haberdashery. In a word, expensive.

"Do you people care for tea?"

They blushed.

Inside the house, Hiroto and Toru halted abruptly. They had returned to their carriage briefly before coming to the door, and carried between them what appeared to be a large valise fashioned from hardwood. "Don't trouble with your shoes," Edward said, as they stood, stopped.

But what stopped them was a line chalked along the floor, down the hallway, into rooms, dividing the house, and the fact Edward kept to one side of this border. They avoided looking at the chalk-line. "My wife and I have, ahem, drawn up this arrangement, until a more permanent solution is effected." Despite his assurances that guests need not acknowledge the chalk division, the two men nonetheless kept to Edward's side.

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"Please forgive the mess," he said. "An inventor's weakness."

In fact he'd done nothing remotely scientific for months, and the true explanation for the half-completed prototype wings and piles of unbound documents in the drawing room was that he hoped to conceal heirlooms from the bailiffs. "If you can find a place to sit, I'll have the housekeeper prepare tea."

The men set their case on the floor and knelt to snap open buckles. The nanny and the housekeeper and the driver had all left long ago, and Edward himself had to produce tea and biscuits, and find a clean pot, and when he returned to the drawing room with the fruit of his efforts he almost dropped the works.

"I hope Darjeeling is — oh. Good Lord."

The Japanese had removed tissue packing and now gently lifted from their case a set of wings — immaculate white wings, extending from a bamboo body. A model, and a superb model at that, gorgeous, and his heart, his heart performed a maneuver when he saw Toru wind an elastic running through the interior. Hiroto looked up at Edward.

"May we?"

Edward managed a nod.

With each wind, tension increased through the model, mirroring his own mounting excitement. Was he even breathing? And then the Japanese launched the model, sending it into the air with a gentle toss, and it stayed aloft, its wings flapped with exact strokes and it *climbed*, it rose, and Edward felt air thumping his face as he followed the flight of the ornithopter around the room, soaring above the tables, lamps, climbing higher, winging toward the ceiling as he turned and turned with its spiraling ascent.

"Dear God...."

"We would like to work with you, Mister Edward Frost."

"Dear God in Heaven...."

"A partnership."

But he was unable to register what the Oriental was saying until the elastic energy had run its course and one of them darted forward to catch the model. Edward wanted to see it fly again. He wanted to examine the underpinnings of the wings, the action. The men repeated what they said. A partnership.

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"I wish I had met you years ago," he said. "Your timing, I'm afraid, is abysmal. Any new endeavors would be interrupted by my previous failures. Look outside! My creditors are everywhere. I'm ashamed to admit that I can no longer provide the right environment for aeronautical study."

The men glanced at one another.

"We would not impose on your estate," said Hiroto.

"We know of your difficulties," Toru continued. "We invite you to Meboso."

"Meboso...?"

"A small village, on Honshu. We think you would find agreeable the terms our master presents."

"Honshu...Japan?"

"We will happily provide, if you will allow, passage for two."

"I...my wife won't accompany me anywhere. Especially not the Far East!"

The Japanese colored. "We were thinking, the boy?"

And Edward turned to see young Reggie standing in the doorway. Reggie must have seen the demonstration too, because he looked much like Edward felt, a child with dreams freshly teased.

1908

Edward sat on a cedar bench, crickets making music in the dusk. He was surprised to find his palms sweaty.

Why should he be nervous to meet any man?

Before relocating to Japan, the notion of rich Orientals had never occurred to him. But time spent in Meboso forced him to appreciate this idea, to cultivate a respect for the wealth commanded by the Shuko Kan *zaibatsu*. Meboso was situated in a valley pegged by four hills of roughly equal size, and the symmetry of the setting seemed to please its inhabitants, as this feature had been pointed out to Edward on more than one occasion. The valley was mostly rice fields and a smattering of homes, rickshaws or wagons occasionally clattering between. On one hillside a great kiln could be seen, where potters from Meboso and other villages came to fire their wares. Edward could see it best after dusk, glowing heart

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occasionally revealed by attendants feeding wood or further pots. To quaint Meboso, resources came, no matter how scarce, how expensive, they came. When he requested a Daimler-Benz motorcar, it was delivered within four days, and in the interval, farmers pulled a plow, breaking ground for the track around which the vehicle would be driven. The estate in which he lived was owned by the Shuko Kan zaibatsu, and the village seemed subservient to it in a sense Edward didn't quite grasp, a relationship both feudal and commercial.

The quality of the English spoken by many locals was another surprise. He'd worried about bringing Reggie here for an extended period, but those fears were quelled when he met the men who would serve as tutors, introducing themselves with a better command of the language than some Society members, back home.

And he found personalities in these people, underneath their courtesy and similar aspects. Hiroto and Toru were nephews of the master, Okura Shuko Kan; they were cousins, dissimilar. Hiroto was contemplative, the one more likely to be found in the aviary, studying the descent of a crane. Toru was the one who spoke with his chest out, the one who voiced occasional fiery opinion of world politics, of Japanese prowess, of sunken Russian ships. The two competed for influence over Edward and the ornithopter's development — they seemed rivals, yet he never heard one speak badly of the other. Such politeness! But what should you expect from a race that lived within paper walls?

He sat in one of the "gardens" within the estate, catching scents of tree sap and plum blossom. Wondering why he was nervous. Why? Everyone treated him with respect. He wiped his palms. He tried to calm himself by staring at patterns raked into gravel.

A cane tapped the path.

He wiped his hands on his pants once more as the small man materialized from darkness. However diminutive, Okura Shuko Kan could, with a word, stop or start any venture in Meboso.

He did not look like a magnate. Wiry hairs sprouted from his chin and ears. Cataract clouded one of his eyes; the other seemed to wander. He looked like he might have been a sickly child.

"I've heard your name so often," said Edward. "It's a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance."

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"I too have heard much of you."

They sat. Bat song accompanied the crickets, and Okura looked skyward with his clear eye. "I am told," he said, "that you and Hiroto wish to build a full-size prototype?"

"Yes. Expanding on your ideas, of course. I think our concept is quite feasible."

Okura nodded, one eye bright.

"An adaptation of the Daimler-Benz engine," Edward continued. "I can't take all the credit. My challenge was linking Bourdon tubes to an internal combustion engine, without reduction by differential gears. You've seen how Hiroto and I incorporated the Bourdon tubes within your wing design? The crankshaft of the engine compresses and releases them; they, in turn, beat the wings, according to your study of wing dynamics. If we can build a working prototype, it will be a tremendous accomplishment. I believe it's an achievable goal, with a modern shop available to us."

"You shall have it," the other man said.

Edward exhaled, realizing now why he had been worried. "Excellent. Truly, this is a capital development for manned flight. We won't disappoint you!"

"But it's too noisy."

Edward paused. "I beg your pardon?"

"Too noisy. Your engine."

"Mister Kan...what makes you say that? We haven't even started — "

"I've seen the motorcar on the track. I have heard it. I cannot help but hear it." He frowned as if he'd tasted a lemon.

"With all due respect," Edward said, "please understand that the amount of lift necessary to overcome the gravity acting on a single man — it's enormous. In Cambridgeshire, I tried every conceivable type of fuel, gunpowder, compressed air, alcohol-fueled boilers, carbolic acid — nothing compares with petrol! No energy source exists with the same potential."

"What does a bird sound like, rising from a branch?"

When Edward said nothing, Okura replied, "Correct. *No motor sound.* What would a forest be, if filled with the racket of your Daimler-Benz? I think it would not be a forest."

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"But nothing can compare with petrol...."

The frail man pulled himself up by the cane and turned back down the path. "Your prototype will be built," he said. "But until we eliminate the noise of the engine, we won't have succeeded."

Okura Shuko Kan left Edward in the dark, very much in the dark. Disappointment mingled with frustration. Was the man daft? They were on the verge, here, of fulfilling Edward's dream, of making history, and Kan was concerned about the engine being too *noisy*? He must be touched. Such was oft the case with visionaries, and Edward resolved not to let any madness impede man's conquest of the skies on flapping wings.

1909

Reggie had put on a kimono. Today was perhaps the most important day of Edward's career, and his twelve-year-old son chose to wear a yellow silk gown embroidered with lilies. Edward stomped in another room and the boy was still wearing the kimono. Edward slammed a cupboard door, he harrumphed and glared, yet the kimono continued to exist! The boy must be deliberately trying to aggravate him. *Kimono*. Even the word was infuriating.

The issue had arisen before, Reggie answering Edward's questions in Japanese, or practicing calligraphy when he should have been studying scripture, or eating roast lamb with chopsticks, or spending his leisure time in the stone garden with a rake and non-Christian philosophies. Once, in frustration, Edward had decreed that the boy should wipe his mind clean of the Japanese language, but this seemed as difficult to enforce as a previous edict that Reggie stop eating rice. Edward watched the boy kneeling to tea in the next room wearing what amounted to a yellow silk dress. He knew not what to do. To say. His son. His child.

His little Japanese boy.

Outside, a ruckus.

Shouts.

It had been so long since Edward heard a voice raised in anger (other than his own) that it drew him to the window. This was a Japanese language he had not previously experienced, one transformed by volume, by emotion, and more surprising still, he knew the two young men

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shouting, the nephews Hiroto and Toru, down in the courtyard, shoving, their faces so flush with anger that they too were difficult to recognize. Shoves got harder, onlookers gathered, men in leather aprons emerging from the machine shop. Toru snatched a bamboo training sword, the kind used in kendo classes, and swung at his cousin, striking bare flesh with an awful smack. Hiroto dove into the crowd and emerged moments later with a matching length of copper pipe. The cousins squared off in the traditional manner and clashed in bursts. For a change Edward found himself blushing at the Japanese. He lowered the blinds, turned.

Reggie stood in the room. Still wearing his kimono.

Edward knew what he must say.

"Change."

"Father?"

"You won't be going to the launch. Not dressed in that fashion."

"But everyone will be dressed formally."

"Yes, but we are a different race, and we mustn't forget that, Reggie. We must show the Japanese what we are, so they too remember."

"But this is what I want to wear." Reggie seldom whined or scowled; he was too reasonable. "It's what I like. It's comfortable."

"Lucky thing a corset is uncomfortable, or I suppose I'd find one under that dress! No. You will change into proper English clothes, and that's the last word on the subject, or you won't come with us, not at all. I'll tell Shimbo to take you to the ocean instead. You will spend the day reading scripture. Reciting Exodus, over the noise of the surf."

The boy stood, taking on the slightest hue. Edward could see him trying to think a way through this disagreement. The boy cocked his head, to the window, to the shouts outside, the ongoing shouts, clattering parries.

"Shouldn't you be flying the ornithopter, Father?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"It's your dream, aren't you always saying? The ornithopter is *your* dream."

"The lads have more practical experience — "

"Why wouldn't you want to fly your own machine?"

"Ah. Now I understand. You're getting back at me."

"Father, is it because you're scared?"

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"Scared!"

He caught himself before answering, before launching into an explanation that sometimes it was more important — even braver! — to observe from the sidelines. It would sound too much like an excuse.

"Go get changed," he said instead.

And Reggie turned and walked quietly to his room.

Scared. What did a boy know about being scared? Edward watched him go.

Change, he thought. *Change.*

Later, they stood at the airfield with zaibatsu members. Shuko Kan family members had come to watch from afar, everyone aware of what was happening and everyone displaying humble anxiety. Not in attendance was Okura Shuko Kan, although perhaps he watched from one of the recently constructed towers. A Shinto priest performed a ritual, chasing demons from the airfield.

Hiroto arrived. His face was bruised from the fight and he appeared profoundly humble. Why doesn't he come stand with us? It must be humiliation, Edward decided. He must have lost the fight.

A roar of engine, and all faces turned to Ornithopter Four.

It was built largely of bamboo — a material the Japanese could manipulate to incredible strength — and the carriage looked like a woven basket, or a bird's nest. Toru wore a handmade flightsuit of crimson silk, and he bowed to various points in the crowd before climbing inside. Edward glanced at Hiroto, with a realization: *the cousins had fought over which of them would take the test fight.* It meant so much to them that they had taken up weapons. They had come to blows over the privilege.

Edward swallowed dryly.

The engine snorted, and wings flapped.

Edward's prototypes back home had flapped with a simple up-down motion, replaced here with the dynamics Okura Shuko Kan had captured, every stroke combining several avian motions, primary feathers turning with upstrokes, the whole framework contracting and expanding. Edward's versions were crude monsters by comparison; this was an achievement worthy of men and birds, majestic wings now pulling the craft forward, without assistance. The crowd murmured, excitement growing as the craft left the ground, carriage leaving the wheels behind. The orno rose, it

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flew, like a bird, wingstrokes carrying it higher, and Toru inside, steady.

Toru was flying. Twenty or thirty feet over the heads of the crowd and still climbing into the sky.

Edward could feel the crowd's admiration. Should it be me? Maybe that was the crux of the Wrights' success, maybe that was why a pair of American bicycle-builders had surpassed the Royal Aeronautical Society, because they flew their crafts themselves, lying prone in their own creations, flying, as it was noted, by the seat of their pants.

Perhaps a man could never succeed unless he valued his dream as highly as his life.

Edward refocused on the ornithopter as the crowd cheered it on, flying over the valley and toward the mountains, before Toru applied the wing-warping controls, turning the craft. Another swell of enthusiasm, as Ornithopter Four flapped back. A triumph. The craft passed above the crowd, wings moving in beautiful strokes, flying over homes and pagodas and towers of the keep, and the crowd still cheering, even when they could see Toru struggling — perhaps screaming, it was impossible to hear him for the engine — and flames spread from there, fuselage burning and Toru struggling for control while also beating at a fire. The crowd continued to cheer even though the flight became erratic and the ornithopter did tight orbits above the keep, one wing burning, one flapping, burning wing, bird on fire, the craft spiraling into a tower, flight arrested but fiery wings still flapping as the craft toppled back, plunged, smearing flames to the ground.

The noise of the crowd changed. People ran toward the crash.

Edward stood frozen a moment, and glanced at Reggie, standing straight in his proper English outfit, looking up at his father now with a gaze that said, *This is why you should have been flying your own dream.*

Edward broke into a run.

1910 — 1918

He would no longer shy from problems, mechanical or personal.

The sublime debut of the Japanese ornithopter — rising so gloriously, crashing so spectacularly — recharged both him and Hiroto, who would never forget that he had landed blows against his cousin for the "privilege" of testing the craft. Toru had been transported to a northern island for

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convalescence, while Edward and Hiroto toiled at designs that would better shield the pilot from petrol's demonic power. They also better harmonized the crankshaft with wing motion, and added "tail feathers" to parallel the cruciform tail unit which had helped stabilize fixed-wing fliers of the West. Edward and his team had completed six more ornithopters before the first significant slowdown.

With the Great War's approach, the zaibatsu shifted resources to naval endeavors. Edward, however, saw a way that the situation in Europe might benefit the ornithopter. And himself. Wouldn't it serve the Royal Air Force well? And if Japan's British allies were sold on the craft, wouldn't that make a profitable situation for the zaibatsu?

Paved roads replaced their dirt predecessors in Meboso while he strategized. The airfield was expanded and improved, with an accompanying hangar, so principles of assembly line production might be applied to the ornithopter. When he wasn't making suggestions or requests to the zaibatsu, Edward penned letters to the RAF and former colleagues in the Aeronautical Society, urging them to arrange for a demonstration of "the first machine capable of true flight."

His early letters were ignored, much to his irritation.

It wasn't just the ornithopter Edward wished to take home.

As Reggie had entered his late teens, the rift between them had grown deeper than puberty itself. Reggie was never disrespectful or impertinent; that might have been a relief. Rather, he rebelled with quietness, with grace, with understatement: he was behaving, to his father's distress, more and more like a perfect young Japanese man. The final straw had been a romantic dalliance with one of the zaibatsu granddaughters, and after intervening, Edward had formulated a plan: he would take Reggie back to England and leave him in the care of his uncle, a Cambridge professor who had agreed to oversee the boy's admission at Hughes Hall and his education as a man, as a Briton.

"Will you come to England with us? It would mean very much to me."

Reggie looked up from calligraphy. "England?"

"The RAF has asked for a demonstration of the ornithopter. For the war. I'm going, and Hiroto. It'll be an adventure, and...an education. You can see where you were born; surely you must be curious?"

"How long would we be gone?"

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"Oh. A few months. Maybe more."

The boy accepted the idea as placidly as a pond accepting a stone; moments later the subject disappeared from his face. They would go. And Edward had plenty of time to break the news.

The voyage seemed interminable. While the crew worried about German submersibles rising from the depths, Edward struggled for the right way to tell Reggie that he must stay in England. Their frigate joined a convoy returning from the Dardanelles for the final leg, and Edward decided to wait until they arrived; telling the boy would be easier with soil under their feet. Solid ground would make the proposition appealing. When Reggie saw the majesty of England, he would love the idea of staying.

Across the Channel they could hear a *boom boom boom*, the sounds of artillery, mortars, sounds of war that had chilled him repeatedly. They docked in Folkestone on February Third, 1916. He thought of his fellow countrymen waiting for them on the airfield in Lympne. Here people had been making sacrifices, while he had been isolated, even pampered, a world away. From his trunk he removed a crisp suit, one he had reserved for this day. He dressed with pride, then went to the cabin where the Japanese were staying.

"I'll fly the orno today."

The zaibatsu members and mechanics looked at him, silent for a moment, stunned, before raising a general protest. The man scheduled to pilot the craft complained loudest, but Hiroto interceded.

"This is Edward's homeland," Hiroto said. "And we should allow him this glory."

He smiled and nodded. He understood, it seemed. He could make the others understand. They agreed that after meeting the RAF representative here in Folkestone, Edward would depart, launching from the deck and flying to the airfield. An appropriately dramatic debut.

They went up as a group to perform a final check on the aircraft and this was where dreams again crashed back to earth, because in the morning sun, the bright mist and familiar smells of seashore, the deck was empty, except for one startled crew member and the wrappings under which the ornithopter had been stored.

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Gone.

"Germans..." Edward breathed. "We've been sabotaged!"

But the guard shook his head, no. "Your son. Such a good boy."

"Reg...?"

"Your son. He told me he was to test engine."

"Reggie...?"

"Testing engine, he told me."

"It's not possible...." He looked at the empty space the ornithopter had occupied, the bindings which had tied it in place. "...what did he...?"

"He flew. He said nothing to me."

"Edward, we must inform the commanders in Lympne," Hiroto said quickly.

But awful things were dawning on Edward, and he said, "Reggie didn't fly toward Lympne. Did he?"

The guard shook his head. "East."

"East?" said Hiroto. "Over the water?"

"But why?" said one of the others. "To France?"

Edward looked into the sky as he felt control slipping out of his grasp, he felt the sun, he felt everything falling apart. A person could fall without having risen. Plans could come apart like loose feathers, fluttering away like hopes and ambitions until you were left in the air without means of support.

From another vantage, those same blocks of sunlight and cloud seemed anything but despairing.

Reggie was *flying*. He was doing it. Flying over the Channel!

This was not the first time he had piloted an ornithopter, but it was the first time *anyone* had attempted to cross this body of water by orno. And he would make it. He would. The carriage was so narrow that the orno's ribs cradled him, and he could feel the essential motion through the framework, compressing him, releasing him: the wings were his own. On both forearms he wore leather braces connected to cables which warped the wings, furthering the sense of integration. He could, pulling or twisting or by a combination of both, change the rate of wingflap, or alter the inclination of either wing.

He was immersed. And he could look down to the green ocean below,

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peeling with waves. Between him and the water, gulls wheeled, oblivious to his presence, accepting it. Mist broke across the carriage as the wings beat strongly, smoothly, pulling him through the sky.

He would make it.

It had not been his plan from the outset. He'd suspected his father wanted him in England for personal reasons, for English reasons, and as Reggie had watched the mechanics tinkering with the orno, the realization had struck him. *He must see his mother.* She would understand him. Reggie would find her, and they would protect one another, and after the war Reggie would return to Japan, alone.

He had not corresponded with his mother in ten years. A minor detail. Compared to a young man flying over the Channel? It was the smallest of minor details. Ahead, coastline materialized, and the orno pulled over land, and the land resolved beneath him, gloomy and scary and pocked by war.

What had he expected? Something other than the haunted field below, burned trees with blackened branches fracturing the mist, and pools of water collected in depressions of unknown origin. Bomb-bursts perhaps, or the movements of heavy artillery. There was nobody below, a few farmhouses and outbuildings, but all was deserted, bleak. He felt, with his wings flapping on either side of him, like a giant scavenger, or a harbinger of future nightmares.

Then, an unfamiliar sound.

A motorized buzzing, somewhere behind him.

He tried to look but the carriage allowed minimal movement, and the sound grew into a cylindered whine, and he saw two biplanes, fixed-wing, zooming in on him. They approached with astounding velocity, one dogging the other, passing him, and his chest clutched his heart. He'd never seen a fixed-wing plane in flight — and while in flight himself! They zipped ahead, and his first fear, that they were German, was relieved with a flash of livery over the tail-fins, blue, white and red indicating these were British aircraft, Sopwith Camels. In the blur of motion he'd also glimpsed the pilots turning their heads, looking in his direction, obviously startled.

They had never seen an ornithopter before.

As the biplanes receded, Reggie wondered how his father and the Shuko Kan zaibatsu hoped to compete with these machines: there was no

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way an orno could match such velocity, such packaged fury. He stared, spellbound.

And then...what?

Far ahead, the aeroplanes banked.

Turning.

Coming back at him.

The pilots had never seen an ornithopter before. And no markings were emblazoned over it, no indications of origin; his father had requested this be so. No sign of nationality.

Another sound cut through the engine noise. *Brappp...brapp....*

Gunfire.

Reggie yanked his warping cables, reducing lift on the right wing and so turning the ornithopter hard in that direction. It performed a tight descending circle, blood rushing into his head. The Sopwiths fired into the place where he had been and zipped above. He looked up, saw them climbing, rolling. Turning themselves for another run. He had a few moments before they descended to his level.

Reggie increased the wingflap and warped into an ascent only a few degrees off the vertical: his rapid climb confounded the biplanes' attack. They fired into empty space and buzzed into another long turn. Reggie's heart beat as fast as his wings. How could he signal that he was an ally? How could he save himself? If only the pilots could hear his father — he was British, for the love of God!

But there would be no communication between them, not over the drone of engines. If he was to survive this episode he would have to pioneer an art, right now, right here, the art of combat between flapping and fixed-wing aircraft. The orno lacked guns, but perhaps hope existed in those long, luxurious turns the biplanes made. He countered with the orno's ability to rise or fall swiftly, letting the Sopwiths commit to a line of flight just before he dropped or jumped out of it. This worked for three more runs before the British pilots worked out a counterstrategy, one staying high, the other low, waiting for the other to flush Reggie into a line of fire. One more peal of machine-gun fire sent feathers flying, and through the warping cables Reggie felt compromise in his wings. His mouth was terribly dry, and he believed it now.

They would kill him.

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He tried to clear his mind of distracting thoughts.

What did he have that they did not? What about the orno could save him?

He descended, decreasing the wingflap, slowing further as the Sopwiths zigged and zagged with the persistence of mosquitoes. They had speed, the orno had slowness. He dropped again, until he flew less than thirty feet over the ground, slow as he could manage, rising and falling with the landscape. A lone cow galloped at the sight of him. The Sopwiths made runs overhead, firing in bursts before they were forced to pull up and bank. Reggie headed for trees. The orno was flying slowly, so slow, great wings beating, a bird, entering the forest. Starlings burst. He swooped under branches, bounced off the ground, banked to avoid a trunk and rose again through boughs and branches. He was flying through forest. Branches swatted the fuselage, rattled his bamboo cage.

The biplanes persisted. They made further extravagant runs, pouring ammunition down, and he was showered with leaves and branch-parts and feathers. The second major strike against a wing, he knew the fight was over. The orno could no longer flap enough to stay aloft, he hit the ground, bounding, once, twice, and the third leap threw the craft into a tree for a jarring halt.

He pulled himself out of the cockpit, the wreck still limply beating its wings. He fell, got up. The sound of the fighters was the voice of mechanized death. His heart pounding, he staggered back from the orno, stumbled. Overhead the Sopwiths continued their runs, shooting where he'd crashed — the pilots must have thought he was still inside, and he ran, he ran, and they strafed the trees, leaves and branches falling on either side of him, in front of him, he changed directions, jangled, confused, nowhere to go as they hacked away, searching for him with fingers of machine-gun fire.

1920-1930

Edward was startled to see the young Japanese woman at his door.

"This is a surprise," he said. "Won't you come in?"

Her name was Asa Tokugawa and she was related to Okura Shuko Kan, just as everyone in Meboso seemed to be related at least by marriage

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to the master. Edward and Asa had never spoken before, although he'd given the girl much thought.

Edward offered her tea, but she declined. He wasn't sure what to say.

"Shouldn't you be busy with...preparations?"

"Most everything is ready. I need only to speak to you."

"By all means."

"Your son, he very dear to me. You believe that, yes?"

"I have decided to attend the wedding tomorrow; you needn't convince me."

"I am glad you will attend our wedding, Mister Frost, very glad. What I hoped was that you might also be happy for Reggie and me. Maybe give us your blessing even, and good wishes."

He sighed. "Oh, dear. My dear girl."

"Do you object to us as a people? We Japanese?"

"No! That's not it at all! I think yours is a grand race, and I'm proud of what your uncles and I have achieved. Nevertheless. Some things don't change. It's simply not right for a British man to marry a Japanese woman."

Her eyes flashed.

"It's about heritage," Edward tried to explain. "Reggie should be proud of his heritage. Instead he looks for every opportunity to squander it, and I'm afraid marrying you is one more attempt. That sounds terrible, I know. But a man's nationality is a terrible thing to waste."

Asa looked hurt.

"I believe," Edward continued, "that your family had similar misgivings."

At this she lifted her eyes.

In fact Edward's protests paled in comparison to the Tokugawa's. Following that disastrous trip to England, Reggie returned to Japan a changed man — no longer a boy, to be sure, and those panicked moments with the Sopwiths had seeded in him an irrational and passionate hatred, not merely for Britain, but for all of Europe, all the West, and the idea of depositing him in Cambridge became suddenly ludicrous. Reggie would no longer water down his allegiance to Japan, and when he announced that he would marry Asa Tokugawa, a daughter of a cousin of Okura Shuko Kan

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himself, Edward realized that all his misgivings would not stand in the way.

But Asa's family had been more actively opposed. The family believed it was wrong for Asa to marry outside her race, and they might have prevented a wedding, if not for one factor.

A fleet — or rather, *flock* — of twenty high-performance ornithopters sat on the Shuko Kan airfield. Several had been sold to other zaibatsu, for private enjoyment of the wealthiest members of Japanese society, and the craft could be seen winging from island to island, symbols of the better future promised by Japanese innovation. Most everyone in Japan had seen or heard of the ornithopters, and public interest had fermented. With the orno's romanticization as a Japanese technology, interest also grew in Reggie Frost and the story of his harrowing flight to France. The Japanese interpreted the incident as an example of antagonization by the West, fixed-wing *gnats* firing on a defenseless orno, and it was a wrong that the Japanese public wished collectively to right. Reggie became something of a folk hero for rejecting his roots and returning to become a pilot. When rumors circulated that the Shuko Kan zaibatsu wished to prevent his wedding to Asa, there was public outcry. Zaibatsu were criticized in the press for their influence over national affairs, and further bad publicity was unwelcome. In the end, Asa's family decided it was better to yield a daughter than risk ceding any of the zaibatsu's power.

"My family will see that we were right," said Asa. "This is a union based on right principles."

Edward forced a smile; he could not agree.

"I do wish you both well," he said instead. "Every success, every happiness."

This seemed to please Asa, and the next day, as he stood at their wedding with a Union Jack pinned to his lapel, he found himself not unhappy. Would he have been more opposed to this marriage, if he had received a warmer reception in England? He'd speculated that maybe he too would stay there, as a representative of the Shuko Kan ornithopter industry. But even after a successful demonstration of the aircraft, he had found his countrymen uninterested, disdainful, unable to see the orno as anything more than a gawky distraction from their fixed-wing efforts.

So he had returned to Japan.

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To Meboso. It wasn't terrible. Modern buildings had replaced rice fields; traffic was steady, and neighborhoods expanded as people moved here to take jobs in industries spurred by the ornithopter. Only one farm remained in the valley and it produced geese, for feathers. As the city grew, military zaibatsu members visited more frequently, and Edward felt a pang of nervousness whenever he saw uniformed men touring the factories.

They have no influence over me, he assured himself. The Japanese mood could not impede the orno.

1935

It looked like a feather. It was soft. It floated to the ground like a feather if he let go. But when he held it under his nose, it smelled like...petrol.

The "feather" was manmade, a homogenous product without a discrete stem or fronds, and although Edward doubted it could rival anything plucked from a goose, the ramifications were not lost on him. It would be improved. And if it could be made once, it could be made a thousand times, a *million* times.

He put the artificial feather in his pocket and went looking for Hiroto.

Neither of them had requested a manmade substitute for feathers; the goose farm was doing well, with publicity campaigns steering the local appetite toward poultry. This morning, the head of the materials research group had simply handed the feather to Edward.

On whose initiative had it been developed?

Edward couldn't say when, precisely, but at some point the research had slipped away from him. Materials science, engineering, wing-flap physics: by necessity these studies had been parceled to other groups. He could no longer keep abreast of advances being made in each, and he realized that although meetings between departments began with English translation, they quickly turned all-Japanese, and nobody protested, or even seemed to notice, if he slipped away before they finished. The feather was one more innovation that happened without him. He had no more control over the evolution of orno technology than he did that of Meboso itself. The rickshaws, gone. The kiln on the southern hillside was

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extinguished, last breath of fire sucked from its belly. Blocks of affordable housing obscured that end of the valley, and a new technical institute had arisen nearby. Even the next valley over was starting to develop, a fact Edward hadn't appreciated until he noticed towers rising from an unnamed industrial concern.

Maybe he didn't look up often enough from his work.

On the airfield more than a hundred ornos sat in rows, wings folded against their hulls, awaiting purchasers. Ornos flapped down to the airstrip or toward Kyoto at almost every hour of the day. Dramatic increases in the lift generated by wings meant that ornos could transport supplies, or passengers. Or troops. Or armaments. Edward had seen, although not participated in the design of, an orno whose primary cargo was ammunition and a single gun of terrible caliber. National enthusiasm was developing into something bigger than Edward, bigger than the zaibatsu. *Eat a goose for national security.* Young boys through the islands strove to grow up on goose meat yet keep a low enough weight to make themselves ideal candidates as pilots. Contemporary Japanese architecture dictated that structures have roosts extending from their summits; in Tokyo, ornos flapped from building to building, shuttling the elite of Tokyo society high above pedestrian traffic. It was all part of a general, expanding enthusiasm that made Edward nervous, because it was linked to the growing nationalism, the fixation on Asian neighbors in rhetoric and demagoguery.

He found Hiroto weeping.

Edward considered walking on, leaving the man alone with whatever grieved him. Wasn't that the polite thing to do?

Maybe. But he forced himself, instead, to sit on the bench opposite.

"My hands," said Edward.

Hiroto looked up.

"I was never much for examining my face in the mirror," Edward went on. "But my hands I can't ignore! When did they become so old? All cracked and bony, curled up on themselves. They look like — "

"The talons of an eagle," suggested Hiroto.

They laughed. Edward indicated his eyes. "To go with my crow's feet!"

Again they laughed.

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And then a moment of shared quiet, in which Edward did not reveal the plastic feather.

He said, "It's your cousins that have upset you."

Hiroto nodded.

"They're getting their way, are they? The military men."

"Everyone is military now. Except you and me."

"What about Okura Shuko Kan?"

"He is...old. He lacks the strength to resist."

Edward exhaled and leaned back. He shut his eyes, and felt overcome by a sense of defeat that had long been approaching. "So we're out of business. The army will be commandeering the factories for tanks and munitions, I suppose."

Hiroto looked at him sharply.

"Oh no," he said. "No, no."

1940 — 1948

Hiroto and Edward stood apart from the crowd. The crowd cheered and even Edward felt charged by this choreographed event. The sprawling Shuko Kan shipyards made for an inspiring setting, testimony to an enormous capacity for industry. Thirty-nine ornos sat on the deck of an aircraft carrier, red circles dyed into their wings. This symbol was everywhere: when the fortieth orno flapped into view, the crowd cheered even louder, because its underside was white with a central red circle, rays of red extending through the wings. The crowd roared and waved back little flags bearing the same symbol.

"The Rising Son," said Hiroto.

Edward smirked. Their friendship had reached the stage where he could hear the other man's puns.

"Reg is a confident showman," Hiroto continued.

"He didn't get it from me."

The orno perched momentarily on a conning tower to spread its wings and display its livery, before it hopped off and glided to the last open space below. The cockpit opened. Reggie, in flight gear, stepped out to receive one of the crowd's noisy salutations. On a nearby platform, Asa appeared with their two daughters, and the trio bowed to the hero, husband, and

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father, before they stepped back into obscurity. Reg's gunner, a young Okinawan who had gained some celebrity by association, made a brief appearance before climbing back into the rear compartment.

"Never in my wildest dreams," said Edward.

"Your wildest dream?"

"My flesh-and-blood. Poster-boy for a Japanese war industry."

"You wish that things had worked out differently."

Hiroto's tone implied a great span of alternate possibilities, and Edward shook them away, saying only, "I loathe war."

"The Asian campaigns are not expected to last long."

Edward was unsure. The war with China dragged on indefinitely. In the early months of World War II, the Japanese enjoyed many successes, nightmares twisted from Edward's dreams, flocks of ornithopters darkening skies over the Philippines and Dutch East Indies, the sound and sight of great flapping wings terrorizing villagers, as the ornos swooped down in advance of ground forces, while the Navy blocked sea access and poured troops and equipment into the mainland. The Japanese had developed their own fixed-wing fighter, too — the zero — but it was ornithopters facilitating the invasions, with their ability to fly over treacherous terrain or swoop down and flap from rooftop to rooftop in ground battles. They engaged fixed-wing craft then dropped into jungle cover, flying through the trees as slow as herons, perching on branches if necessary. Or they hovered high, out of range of land-based retaliation while their gunners picked targets on the ground. Edward suffered through propaganda screened at the local theater, he had seen newsreel footage of an orno flying *inside* a temple, flapping before the benevolent gaze of a giant, golden Buddha. Ornos transported the Imperial Japanese Army from Eastern China in all directions, advancing its agenda in places where no roads or airfields reached. Images woke Edward in the night, in cold sweat, breathing hard, heart racing.

This would be history. Images would filter through the generations, by newsreel, by oral account, by modern myth-making: people would remember a Rising Sun advancing over Asia on terrible feathered wings.

He had lost control of his dream.

He tried telling himself nobody had control over an idea but couldn't convince himself. Early in the conflict, when the jingoism and hyper-

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nationalism had still been mostly talk, Edward had made an effort, one desperate effort to avoid that which he feared most.

The idea came to him when Toru returned to Meboso. Toru, who still walked with a limp due to his ill-fated test flight. He returned not for further study of ornos or any aspect of science, but wearing a full uniform and ceremonial sword.

"Hello Tommy!" Edward had called to him cheerfully. But Toru looked the other way.

The zaibatsu placed Shuko Kan family members in all corridors of Japanese power — economic, government, military. These men came to Meboso in showy cars to discuss policy and coordinate their efforts in the zaibatsu's interest. When Edward saw Toru among this group of elites, early during the Chinese conflict, he requested an audience.

He joined a group of eight politicians and generals, including Toru, for dinner. Hiroto introduced Edward to these men, and he recognized some names from national affairs. They sat on the floor (Edward with a pillow), and were served works of art: rice cakes wrapped in cherry leaf, wild mountain vegetables served on papers folded to resemble cranes. Conversation progressed in Japanese, and Edward, the only one with a fork and a baked carp, poked at his dinner. He waited for a lull in the conversation. When it came, he found the power-brokers looking at him with interest.

"They, ah." Hiroto seemed embarrassed. "They wish to hear your point of view. Your opinion. How you think Japan will fare in the coming conflicts. I'm sorry, Edward. I'll tell them you are not interested in politics, only flight."

"No," said Edward. "It would be my pleasure."

He returned their gazes.

"Tell them they can take everything they want in Asia. If they do not drag Britain into the conflict."

Hiroto paused, then began translation.

"The West will look for reasons to avoid adding a Far Eastern front to their troubles," Edward continued. "You must give them good reasons. Make arrangements with them, behind closed doors. Allow for concessions and negotiate. The Americans, too. The American public opposes military action, and if you make bargains, their leaders will have no mandate to stop you. Don't force the West into a situation where they

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must fight. Decide what to concede ahead of time, and let them forgive your true ambitions. You can succeed, but only by avoiding Western enemies."

He spoke rapidly, with an edge to his voice, but filtered through Hiroto, his opinion emerged in level, uninflected Japanese. The men leaned toward Hiroto as he spoke. For all Edward knew, his friend could be editing, diluting the message, perhaps saying something completely different. He was at the mercy of translation.

When Edward finished, Toru spoke with a sneer. Hiroto interpreted.

"Toru suggests you say these things only to avoid war with your homeland."

Edward nodded. "Yes. For personal reasons, I dread the prospect of Japan warring with Britain. But what I tell you also happens to be true, that you will be pitifully sorry if you extend your hostilities beyond Asia. And Reggie — Reggie won't endorse military efforts against England. He won't promote your ambitions if it means betraying his homeland. You will lose a valuable asset, I promise."

Hiroto translated, flushing slightly. Perhaps the generals knew this was a lie. Perhaps they didn't value Reggie's propaganda value as highly as Edward presumed. Or perhaps they believed in nationalism enough to think it ran into the flesh and blood of a person, that Reggie might in fact denounce their goals, if faced with fighting his own people.

How curious. Here Edward found himself again speaking of the fictional Reggie, the patriot, the son he imagined rather than the son he had. Speaking to zaibatsu power-brokers was the last gambit Edward would make on that imaginary Reggie. He watched the men sit back, in the wake of his translated words, and tried to read their expressions.

In a few years none of this would matter. In a few years this effort would seem pathetic, after his worst fear's realization.

In 1943, the United States joined the war. With U.S. support, the Allies began to turn the tide in Europe, and not long after, word spread of warships leaving the Atlantic for Asia.

The Allies added Japan to their list of enemies, for the expansionism that had gone more or less unchecked since Manchuria. The American navy blockaded the islands, trying to force capitulation by economic

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strangulation, but the Japanese were entrenched in their conquests, and stealthy lines of supply by ornithopter proved difficult to disrupt. Ornithopters — often in flocks a hundred strong — flapped along the coastline, guarding against land invasions which the Allies were rumored to be preparing. Edward became obsessed with the war, demanding English language newsreels and asking Hiroto to translate long articles and editorials. In vicious battles the ornos defended their conquests, feathers littering waters, bodies floating in tangled frames of bamboo and paper.

And the folk hero continued to refuse promotions. Edward read that Reggie Frost had been offered positions of command several times, and each time, he refused, preferring instead to fight on the front line, against the Western forces which he despised so much.

How can you be so stupid? *How*?!

Edward said to Hiroto, "He has taken this too far! Killing fellow countrymen! *Choosing* to do so, when he could simply accept a position behind battle lines! It's cold-blooded, it's...*sick*."

Hiroto would nod, not necessarily agreeing with these outbursts but understanding their inspiration.

How can you be so stupid? Edward thought.

He longed for an end to the war — any ending, victory, defeat, he wasn't sure what to hope for — he just wanted it to be done with so he might confront Reggie and force him to answer for his stupidity. Casualties mounted, while rumors circulated of an American invasion of Japan.

It never came. Apparently, the Allies had banked on first softening resistance with some secret weapon of unprecedented power, but it had been turned back, twice, by ornos and zeros on patrol. Once, in the summer of '45, buildings on Honshu quaked enough for glass to shatter, but the Japanese government and zaibatsu leaders didn't equate this seismic event with the B-52 downed somewhere over the Pacific.

The war fizzled. Four years after making mutual declarations of war, both Japan and the Allies found themselves exhausted, depleted, weary of conflict. The Americans had come to view the Japanese occupation of China as a desirable distraction for Russia, which was becoming their greater concern. In 1948, the U.S.S. Missouri docked in the Shuko Kan family shipyard for the signing of the armistice that would end hostilities. A percentage of the Japanese public came to witness this moment in

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history, crowds much quieter than at the event Edward had earlier attended. Today the people erupted only once, as ornithopters carrying Japanese Prime Minister Fumimaro and General Hideki flapped into view, gliding down to their appointment.

Edward might have found satisfaction in their choice of transportation, had he not become suspicious of excuses the Japanese military gave him for Reggie's absence from this ceremony, and others.

1953

Edward knocked on the door. Asa pulled it open.

"Edward," she said. "How very nice to see you."

Her English had improved. In the background he heard the girls squeal *ojiisan!* and rapid little footsteps preceded their appearance, Fumiyo and Junko, flying at him, wrapping themselves around his legs with such oompf he was almost bowled over. He laughed. Asa looked aghast, but before she might rebuke them, Edward said, "Please, please, this is what I came for!"

The girls looked up, beaming.

"Won't you come inside Edward for a...spot of tea?"

"Perhaps later. I'd hoped the girls might take me for a walk."

They hopped up and down.

"Yes, ojiisan," said Fumiyo, "A walk! A walk!"

Before they left, Asa said something to the girls in Japanese, which Edward guessed might be translated as: *Take care of your grandfather. He's a very old man, and needs assistance.* The girls nodded solemnly.

He was about to go, but paused and said to Asa, "I hope it's not too late for an apology. For not being enthusiastic when you came to see me that day, years ago. You were right. You and Reggie made a fine couple."

Asa smiled and nodded slightly.

The girls walked him through gardens, patterns in stone having varied not much over the decades, a slightly different fingerprint whorling about them. The girls appeared healthy and happy. His worries were always alleviated when Asa came to Meboso. She and the girls were managing okay without Reggie: surviving.

Reggie had been killed during the war, sometime in November of '46,

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near the island of Okinawa. An air battle, his ornо shot down over water. The Japanese military had suppressed this news. They needed tales of heroism to bolster morale, they needed to claim Reggie was alive and demanding to stay on the front lines of air combat, to inspire young Japanese soldiers. The military had, after his death, invented the Reggie they needed.

Edward couldn't shed his own version of Reggie until after the poor boy, the real boy, had been killed.

"Tell us about England," said Fumiyo, as they walked. "Tell us about Kew Gardens. And the Queen of England."

"Again?"

"England is our country, too. Isn't it? We're English girls, in a way?"

Fumiyo looked up at him with bright almond eyes. Edward smiled; he stroked her black hair, and her sister moved to receive his other hand's adoration. Sherwood Forest. Cliffs of Dover. The Mersey. The girls drove their mother mad with England, and Edward loved them so much his chest ached. "I think it would be nice if we could go to England together," Fumiyo announced.

"I'm going too!" said Junko.

"You have all the time in the world," Edward assured them.

"And you'll come with us, ojiisan?"

He didn't answer with more than a smile, and the girls became quiet. "There's something I want you to see."

It wasn't just a walk he wanted but a full hike, up a trail out of Meboso. It was nice to get out of the city. Along the way, Edward paused to look at the remains of the old kiln, reduced to an outline of bricks around a rectangle of scorched earth. The trio climbed further, until they could look down on Meboso's crowded streets. New high-rises were designed with oval holes in their upper heights: ornos landed in these openings, and passengers could get on or off before the craft proceeded out the other side. Edward counted a dozen buildings with such holes to the sky.

Junko complained once or twice as they walked. For a while, Edward carried her in his arms, while Fumiyo talked and talked. She spoke of school, of rules she was learning about thermals and wind. She was also studying the code of conduct which governed air traffic, and tried to explain it to Edward.

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A bulky transport flapped through the air like an albatross. Another long orno soared overhead bearing the symbol of *Winged Bliss*, a commercial enterprise. All traffic was governed by the code, crafts pausing, dipping, turning polite right angles to one another. To Edward it seemed overly formalized — flight shouldn't be decorous as a tea ceremony — but the code had enabled a huge expansion of popular flight. Fumiyo talked about the code and sundry other topics, but she most often returned to one theme.

"I want to see England."

"Of course you will."

"We could fly over Cambridgeshire together," Fumiyo said. "We could fly over the Tower of London."

"All the famous sights."

"I'm coming too!" Junko reminded them.

They arrived at a ridge overlooking the next valley, which was more industrial than Meboso and centered around a sprawling power plant, though Edward saw no coal, no wood, and there were no rivers nearby. The three of them found rocks to sit on. What kind of power did that leave?

"It's ugly," Fumiyo said.

"True," he replied. "But there's something I want you to see."

They waited and watched, until at last, it appeared. Where? Where? Edward pointed it out, the strange craft built perhaps entirely of plastic, with wings unlike anything Edward had seen before. It had emerged from a niche in the power plant's east wall. Fumiyo and Junko stared at the orno. The wings were the most striking anomaly: diaphanous sheets spread from the body and beat with a liquid, sine-wave motion. But perhaps the more significant difference was what this craft lacked: the noise of a petrol engine. It had no engine that Edward could see, nor accommodation for a fuel tank along its slender, dragonfly fuselage, and his best guess was that the craft received power not from an internal source, but from the power plant, energy somehow transmitted from the concave disks on the roof.

The craft rose higher, zipped forward, wings a mathematical blur, and still no sound apart from a gentle churning of the air.

"I met a man," said Edward, "with a dream."

"What man?"

"Okura Shuko Kan. He dreamt of an orno that made no noise."

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"He's not alive still, is he, grandfather?"

"Not in the conventional sense."

They watched the silent orno skim around the power-plant some more, looking both frail and revolutionary in its infancy; then it returned to the cubbyhole in one of the towers. Edward watched his girls, he listened to them, he listened to Fumiyo's talk of England, her fantasies of flying over Cambridgeshire and the cliffs of Dover. He might have told her something that had taken him a long time to discover, a realization that gratified him immensely as he sat with them on a mountain ridge in Japan: it was not so much seeing dreams come precisely true which mattered, but the privilege of having them to begin with, the joy of seeing them realized in ways that surprised even the dreamer. ☙

COMING ATTRACTIONS

IN JULY WE'LL THRILL to a tale of derring-do, compliments of Lewis Shiner. His cover story, "Lizard Men of Los Angeles," takes us back in time and below the surface of L.A. with an adventure story worthy of the old pulps.

Balancing the non-stop action of Mr. Shiner's tale, we'll also be bringing you a very different sort of science fiction story: "Suicide Coast" by M. John Harrison. Showing how a Virtual Reality setup can help a handicapped man, Harrison gives us a heart-rending vision of the near future.

Also on tap in months to come are stories by Scott Bradfield, Michael Kandel, R. Garcia y Robertson, Lucy Sussex, and many others.

Last month we let out of the bag a lot of our surprises for our big October anniversary issue. One correction must be made: the Harlan Ellison story on hand will not be a novella (that must await another day). Instead we expect to bring you a record-setting short story from the Man in the Bookstore Window himself. That tale, plus stories by Ursula K. Le Guin, Lucius Shepard, and Jonathan Carroll (to name a few) is only a few months away. Subscribe now so the bookstore clerks can't torment you by shelving issues in the wrong section.

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CURIOSITIES

WHERE THE BLUE BEGINS BY CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

I'M A sucker for talking animal stories. But seldom have I encountered so gracefully seductive an Aesopian parable as Christopher Morley's *Where the Blue Begins* (1922). The adventures of a humanly intelligent dog named Gissing, a nonconformist in a completely canine world, this book combines the pastoral charms of *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), the urbanity of James Branch Cabell, the wackiness of Thorne Smith, and the mysticism of a whole pot of Inklings.

If he's remembered at all today, Christopher Morley (1890-1957) is probably recalled for his literary essays or his bestseller, *Kitty Foyle* (1939). But in a time when genre borders were less formidable, Morley felt free to jump from one mode to another, and this novel is just one of his fantasies.

The clothed and pipe-smoking, bipedal Gissing is a well-off dog with a country home, who manages to suppress his many doubts and desires. But then three orphaned puppies land on his doorstep. These foundlings ignite in Gissing a horde of existential qualms all symbolized by "the miracle of blue unblemished sky." Eventually, entrusting the puppies to Mrs. Spaniel, Gissing sets out for Manhattan, determined to unriddle the core mysteries of life. Instead, he bumbles blithely from one contretemps to another, trying his paw as store manager, minister, and ship's captain. The book's ending delivers a heart-rending moment when Gissing comes face to face with his long-sought God, and then is dumped back onto the quotidian plane of existence, yet ennobled.

Morley's dialogue and characterizations are absolutely brilliant, his touch light and assured. This quintessentially Jazz Age novel simultaneously encapsulates and transcends its era.

—Paul Di Filippo

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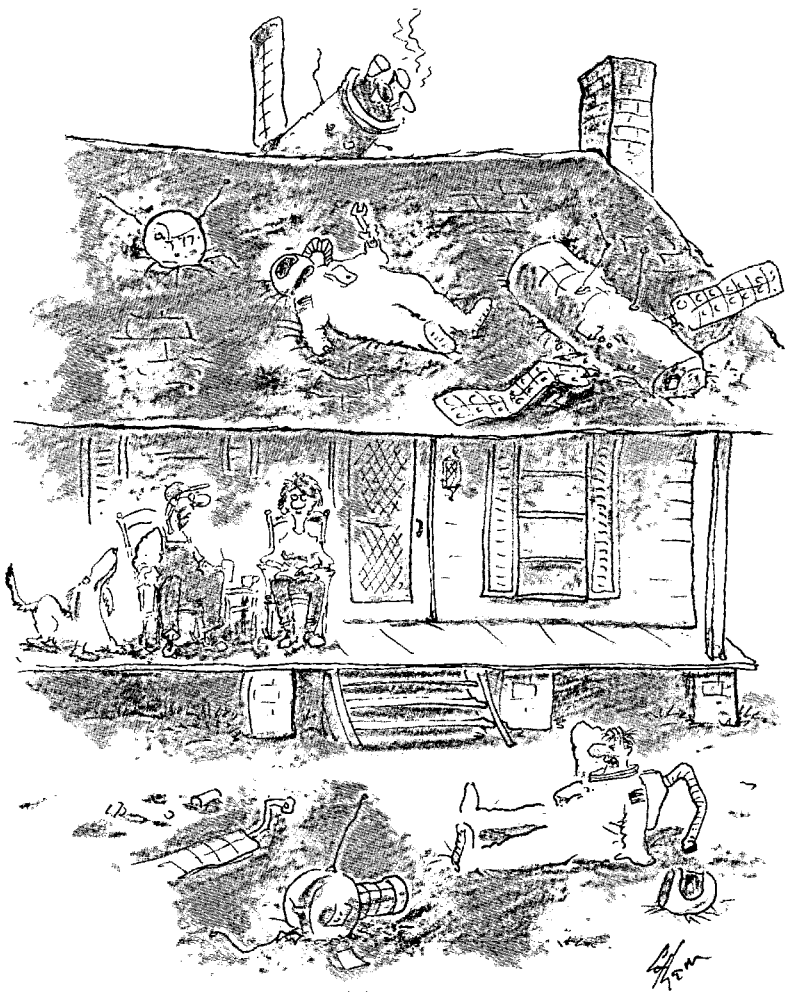

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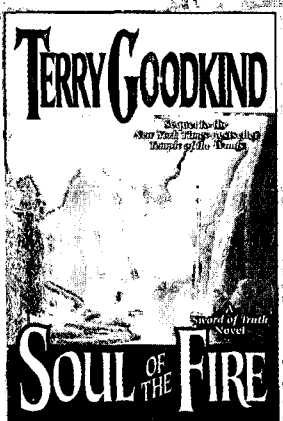

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